

Week 1 subplot: Element of surprise for Broncos, Seahawks

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 7, 2018

In their final preseason tune-up, the Seahawks' starting offense ran 35 snaps and used only two personnel groups: Three receivers/one running back/one tight end and two receivers/two tight ends/one running back.

Broncos inside linebacker Brandon Marshall noticed.

"They've saving it," he said. "They're going to come out with something we haven't seen."

A lot of somethings.

The challenge for players and coaches — and the beauty for fans — about every Week 1 game is the unknown. The Seahawks and Broncos staffs have been plotting for Sunday since the schedule came out in late April. They know which matchups they want to exploit offensively and which pressure packages and coverages defensively could cause trouble.

Thing is, they have kept it under wraps. The team that can better execute their new looks in a game setting will start 1-0.

"It's definitely a unique game," Broncos offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said after practice Thursday. "There's nothing like an opener. We know things we've seen on film from Seattle won't necessarily be what we see on the field on Sunday."

Against Minnesota two weeks ago, the Seahawks' offense kept it simple and so did their defense. The starters had only six five-man pressures — four from the slot corner and two from the linebackers, Bobby Wagner and Barkevious Mingo.

Against Washington two weeks ago, the Broncos' top defense rushed four men on 12 of 15 drop-backs. Musgrave used four personnel groups, but primarily stuck to three receiver/one tight end/one back (21 first-half snaps).

Seahawks coach Pete Carroll said his team is preparing for the Broncos "in a general sense."

"That's always the case," Carroll said. "You can take the preseason games and you try to figure it out and everybody is doing that solve-the-puzzle game so we have to be ready to adjust. The guys that adjust the best in this game (have the edge). By the time we get to halftime, we'll all have a pretty good feel for what's going on."

The Seahawks will present several play-calling challenges: Broncos players confirmed Seattle didn't show much in the preseason, offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer is new and receivers Doug Baldwin and Tyler Lockett and running back Rashaad Penny are coming back from injuries.

“They were kind of bland, but they won’t be bland at all in our game,” Marshall said. “It’s tough to watch their film to study because their coordinator came from (Indianapolis) so we could watch Indy’s tape but they’ll also still want to do what (quarterback) Russell Wilson does and cater to their best players.”

Schottenheimer was the Colts’ quarterback coach last year so watching Indy film is unlikely to glean much intelligence. He was last an NFL coordinator in 2014 (Rams). Wilson’s unique style of play makes it probable Schottenheimer has tailored his playbook to his quarterback’s strengths.

“We have to read our keys, stay disciplined and play fast,” Marshall said. “By the end of the first quarter, we’ll know what they’re trying to do.”

Said safety Justin Simmons: “Just like them, with our third game, we kept the menu pretty short so we could execute at a high level and didn’t want to show too much on tape. I’m sure that was (Seattle’s) mindset. We’re expecting some of those (same) plays, but new stuff will pop up, too.”

From an offensive standpoint, the Broncos must be wary of the nickel back blitz from quarterback Case Keenum’s blindside. Left tackle Garrett Bolles will kick out and left guard Ron Leary will pick up the defensive end.

“You’re watching film, but at the same time, they’ll have surprises,” Bolles said. “You roll with it. If something happens you don’t expect, you don’t get frustrated. You go to the sidelines and get it fixed.”

Tight ends coach Geep Chryst has been an offensive coordinator for San Diego and San Francisco. One year with the 49ers, they spent time practicing a three tight end/one receiver/one running back package.

“We had purposely not shown that,” Chryst said. “Everybody is trying to do that. What can we keep in the garage under the cloak of secrecy? It was the most exciting thing to roll that out and drive around in.”

Said Musgrave: “It will be a tough game to coach. We’ll need to make adjustments on the fly between series, not just at halftime, and we’ll be ready for that.”

Broncos preview 2018: New additions should improve Denver's woeful red zone offense

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 7, 2018

Everything about last year's Broncos offense was tough to watch.

They cycled through quarterbacks like they had an expiration date, turned the ball over more than any team except Cleveland and did not have a 1,000-yard receiver for the first time since 2011.

But if the Broncos are to go from worst to first in the AFC West this year, their red-zone offensive production will be critical.

It must be better. And, really, it can't get much worse.

The Broncos' red-zone offense was first in 2013 and fourth in 2014, scoring touchdowns on 76.1 and 62.9 percent of their opportunities with quarterback Peyton Manning at the top of his game. But the touchdown efficiency decline has been startling — 28th in 2015 (47.7 percent; they still won the Super Bowl), 26th in 2016 (46.8) and last in 2017 (39.6 percent).

In just five years, the Broncos have sunk from first in points per red-zone possession (5.87) to last (3.83).

But new offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave should have several reasons to be encouraged: the signing of quarterback Case Keenum, the draft of a physical tailback — Royce Freeman — who can pound for valuable real estate, the debut of tight end Jake Butt and the arrival of second-round receiver Courtland Sutton.

Better players could make Musgrave's red zone play-calling sing.

"Any time you have better players, your red zone offense looks better," said tight ends coach Geep Chryst, who has coordinated offenses in San Diego and San Francisco. "We like the additions we made this offseason but we need to work on it so we're working on it."

Red-zone periods were a constant during the open training camp practices in August. The Broncos needed to get all of their young players (Sutton, Freeman, Butt and receiver DaeSean Hamilton) up to speed with that part of the playbook.

Sutton knows how to use his 6-foot-4 frame to win in the air, making him a perfect option for red-zone fade routes, which should open up quick slants for Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders.

"(Sutton's) a big body with great ball skills," coach Vance Joseph said. "He has strong hands so even when the ball is contested, he can win. Hopefully he's over 50 percent (on the 50-50 passes). That would be huge for us, especially in the red zone."

Close to the 20-yard line, Butt and tight end Jeff Heurman had success beating linebackers down the right and left seam, a big-time asset in the red zone.

The challenge for Butt, Chyrst said is, “where are those little air pockets in the defense? And then (against man coverage), you try to win the 1-on-1 matchup because you’re not going to get 1-on-none in the red zone.”

During a two-point conversion play against Chicago last month, Heurman used a double move to easily beat his opponent and catch Keenum’s pass.

Freeman isn’t afraid of contact so he could be the goal-line option — he scored on a four-yard against the Bears and looked comfortable in tight confines.

It all starts with Keenum, though. He knows how to force the football to a receiver without being careless. He knows how to extend the play, rolling right or left while keeping his eyes up for the receiver who leaks open.

Last year for Minnesota, Keenum had 16 red-zone touchdown passes and no interceptions. The Vikings’ 112.1 red-zone passing rating was second in the league; the Broncos were 29th (79.5).

Last year, the Broncos started 7 of 9 in the red zone in wins over the Chargers and Dallas to start the season. But then followed a stretch of 2 of 12 that helped derail the season. Over their final six games, Denver scored only four touchdowns in 15 red-zone possessions.

Staying on schedule was the usual culprit. Take December’s win over the New York Jets. The Broncos went 1 of 4 in the red zone. Their three non-touchdown possessions:

First down: Three-yard check down pass. Second down: Two-yard check down pass. Third down: Incompletion into double coverage.

First down: Bad throw incompletion. Second down: Four-yard run despite having three tight ends in the game to block. Third down: Three-yard pass.

First down: No gain run. Second down: Sack. Third down: Four-yard run.

The playmakers didn’t get open or their quarterback was inaccurate, indecisive or both or the offensive line didn’t open a hole. The Broncos ranked last in yards per red-zone play (2.09) and 16th in red-zone third down chances (38.5 percent).

In this year’s preseason, Musgrave presented multiple personnel combinations and formations during red-zone trips against Chicago.

From the Bears 18, the Broncos ran one receiver/two back/two tight ends and threw to fullback Andy Janovich in the flat. On the next play, they had three receivers to the left and motioned tailback Phillip Lindsay out of the backfield and to the left; he caught a short pass that was negated by a penalty. Later in the game, Musgrave motioned tight end Matt LaCosse to Sutton’s side. That created confusion among two Bears defensive backs. They both followed LaCosse, freeing up Sutton for a 16-yard touchdown catch.

The Broncos are Musgrave's fifth NFL coordinator spot. In his eight years as a coordinator, Musgrave's offenses have finished in the top half of the league three times — ninth with Minnesota in 2011 (56.6), 14th in 2015 (57.1) and ninth in 2016 (61.0) with Oakland.

"Red zone is important because if we do a good job there, there is a huge difference between seven and three," Musgrave said. "We've got strides to make in that area so let's put the time on task to get better."

How Phillip Lindsay became the Broncos' starting kick returner. "It's really a courage play — and he has courage."

By Ryan O'Halloran and Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
September 7, 2018

Phillip Lindsay has not returned a kickoff in a meaningful football game since December 2016 with the Colorado Buffaloes.

He enters the Broncos' Week 1 matchup against Seattle as the team's top kickoff return man.

"I'm ready to get to work and prove myself," Lindsay said.

The transition might surprise on paper, Denver handing its kick return duties to an undrafted rookie, but much like the rest of Lindsay's story, he's quickly erased any doubt. Lindsay's 34-yard return against Minnesota marked the longest of any Bronco through exhibition play. That's just one example of what gave Broncos' coach Vance Joseph confidence in putting Lindsay on the return team.

"He's been a solid performer since he's gotten here four or five months ago," Joseph said Thursday. "He has confidence in himself so it's easy to have confidence in him. I've been pleased with where he is as a total football player — covering kicks, returning, catching the ball and protection. He's what we want in our backs."

However, Broncos Country also remembers the last time a rookie was named a starter in the return game. Wide receiver Isaiah McKenzie fumbled six times last year in his first season taking punts back for the Broncos. That role will now be filled by veteran cornerback Adam Jones. That ordeal hasn't given Joseph reason for concern with Lindsay, though.

The real reason Lindsay got the starting nod?

"It's more of a courage play," Joseph said. "It's a catch-able ball every time, it's a really simple decision on how we coach it. It's really a courage play — and he has courage."

Miller on Mack. Linebacker Von Miller was asked about the departure of fellow pass rusher Khalil Mack from the AFC West's Oakland Raiders to the Chicago Bears. Mack was traded last weekend for a package that included two first-round picks and he then signed a record-setting contract that included \$90 million guaranteed.

"You've got a lot of pass rushers (in the division)," Miller said. "You've got 99 (Joey Bosa of the Chargers), 54 (Melvin Ingram of the Chargers), 50 (Justin Houston of the Chiefs) and 55 (Dee Ford of the Chiefs). It changes a little bit with (Mack) going to Chicago. I love to see Khalil go and get what he deserves. He's been a great defensive player. One of the best, if not the best defensive player for a little bit now. I'm happy for him."

Thomas update. Seahawks All-Pro safety Earl Thomas ended his lengthy offseason contract holdout this week, but as of late Thursday, it remained unknown whether he will play Sunday.

“Their secondary is excellent,” Broncos offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave said. “They have extremely sticky coverage and have had it for years no matter who’s playing over there. Whoever they’ve got. They’re all trained the same way. It’s a challenge to move the ball against this group.”

Pacman fitting in. In addition to returning punts for the Broncos, Adam Jones could play a role at cornerback against Seattle. Jones was signed Aug. 26 and played against Arizona in the preseason finale.

“He’s familiar with the defense, the terminology is just different,” Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. “He hasn’t been here that long, but he’s picking it up fast. We’re just going to bring him along at his own pace. We’ll give him a few reps here and there.”

Woods said if Jones is on the field, he will play outside, which means Chris Harris will cover the slot receiver on sub-package downs.

How the 1991 Denver Broncos went from worst to first

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 7, 2018

1991: WORST TO FIRST

What went wrong in 1990: The Broncos' defense gave up 23.4 points per game and the season fell apart with a six-game losing streak. ... After reaching the Super Bowl during the 1989 season, the Broncos went from first to worst despite having the NFL's fifth-leading rusher (Bobby Humphrey, 1,202 yards) and passer (John Elway, 3,526 yards), respectively

Forecast for 1991: Sports Illustrated picked the Broncos to finish 8-8, tied for third in the five-team AFC West. Elway, entering his ninth year, was given the play-calling duties by coach Dan Reeves.

Final record: 12-4, first in AFC West.

Key statistics: The Broncos' defense was elite — third in scoring (14.7 points per game) and fifth in yards (284.3 per game). They also had 23 interceptions and three Pro Bowl defenders (linebacker Karl Mecklenburg and safeties Steve Atwater and Dennis Smith). ... The Broncos had three winning streaks of at least four games. ... Elway had 13 touchdowns and 12 interceptions.

Turning point: On Nov. 17, the Broncos traveled to Kansas City and both teams entered with a 7-3 record. Trailing 13-10, the Broncos took a 24-13 lead on Mark Jackson's 29-yard touchdown catch and Charles Dimry's 26-yard interception return for a touchdown a minute later. The Broncos won 24-20. Gaston Green rushed 24 times for 133 yards and the defense intercepted Steve DeBerg four times.

Playoffs: The Broncos beat the Houston Oilers 26-24 in the divisional round, but lost 10-7 at Buffalo in the conference title game. David Treadwell's 28-yard field goal with 16 seconds remaining provided the winning points against the Oilers and capped an Elway-led drive of 12 plays, 87 yards (without timeouts) in 1:51. In the AFC title game, Buffalo's vaunted offense was limited to 214 yards and the Bills' only touchdown was an 11-yard interception return by Carlton Bailey. Elway was unable to finish the game because of a thigh injury.

Broncos preview 2018: Rookie Bradley Chubb gives Denver one of NFL's top pass rushing units

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
September 7, 2018

Inside the Broncos' draft room in April, general manager John Elway sat among his coaches and advisers, examining every possibility for the fifth overall pick.

He believed only one defensive player in the 2018 draft class might fit the mold of Broncos linebacker Von Miller, a once-in-a-generation talent. That player? North Carolina State edge rusher Bradley Chubb. But Elway was not optimistic.

"We didn't think he was going to be there," he said.

Off the board went quarterback Baker Mayfield, running back Saquon Barkley and quarterback Sam Darnold. Cleveland was on the clock again at No. 4. The Browns stunned the Broncos by taking Ohio State cornerback Denzel Ward.

"I almost passed out," Broncos defensive coordinator Joe Woods said. "I was very appreciative of that. There was a possibility (Chubb) could come to us. ... Dreams do come true."

For an NFL team to make a worst-to-first transition, a little bit of luck helps, and adding Chubb to a roster stacked with edge rushers is one big reason why Denver believes it might be able to pull it off.

Chubb arrived at his introductory Broncos news conference in April with his father, Aaron, a former Georgia linebacker (1985-88), his mother, Stacey, and his brother, Brandon, a Detroit Lions linebacker. They've provided the groundwork for Chubb the person, long before he developed into Chubb the football player. It's the place to start in identifying what should give Broncos Country hope Chubb will someday join Miller as an elite talent.

"Growing up, my dad would make sure he held us to a higher standard than everyone else around us," Chubb said. "I feel like that helped not only me, but my brother as well, with being great men. Being a Chubb is something different, and I have to have a higher expectation for myself and for future generations to come."

Chubb, born and raised in Marietta, Ga., played running back and outside linebacker as a middle school football player, but Aaron said he never forced sports on his boys. Chubb's early size and athleticism couldn't be ignored, however. In those early days, Chubb's coordination had yet to catch up to his skill set, and he didn't start on varsity in high school until his junior season — the same year he tore an ACL.

Chubb arrived on campus at North Carolina State in 2014 as a "project" edge rusher, raw but eager to learn. He appeared in three games as a true freshman. A move from outside linebacker to defensive end the following spring clicked. Chubb started every game as sophomore and forced five fumbles and had 5 1/2 sacks. Quite the validation for North Carolina State coach Dave Doeren, who stuck with Chubb when plenty of big-name schools stopped recruiting him due to the knee injury.

During the offseason before Chubb's breakout junior season, his stardom began to unfold.

"I'm not going to tell you at that moment I knew he was a first-round pick, but at that moment I knew he was going to be the best player we had," Doeren said.

Beyond his gaudy college statistics — 54 1/2 tackles for loss and 25 sacks — Chubb displayed an attitude to work all the angles. On several occasions, he was caught stealing the hand towels of opposing quarterbacks. You can imagine their reaction.

"The whole game is mental, I feel like," Chubb said. "I do different things to get in their heads. If I'm consistently on his neck and breathing on him the whole time, that's in his head as well. I do different things to get after them and silly stuff like the towel thing ... I'm being relentless and making sure he knows I'm there."

Sound like anyone else wearing orange and blue? Miller, famously flagged for pulling a fake-handshake with then Bills' quarterback Tyrod Taylor last season, has a personality and rushing style that mirrors some of what Chubb brings to the table.

The Broncos will ask Chubb to expand his role in transitioning to the pro game by shifting between defensive end and outside linebacker, and being tasked with both chasing the quarterback and dropping into coverage. Chubb, 6-foot-4, 269 pounds, welcomes the challenge.

"For a big guy, I still have the ability to move and the ability to drop into space," he said. "I feel like it's an advantage for me because when I come off the edge, I can do speed and power because of my size. I can drop into coverage as well. It allows me to be more versatile."

Chubb's life changed forever when he received the draft-night phone call. "Congratulations, bud," Elway said in a team video of the conversation. "We're thrilled that you're a Bronco." Back at the Chubb family table inside AT&T Stadium below the draft stage, there were water works.

"Very emotional," Stacey Chubb said. "Just to see his face light up ... he was so ecstatic."

CHUBB'S GOAL: JOIN ELITE COMPANY

The Broncos used the fifth overall pick in this year's draft on linebacker/defensive end Bradley Chubb. Here is how several Broncos pass rushers fared as rookies:

LYLE ALZADO (1971)

Rookie year: A fourth-round pick, Alzado played in 12 games (11 starts) and Broncos research credited him with eight sacks, second on the team.

Career: Played first eight years of 15-season career with the Broncos. ... Started 98 of 99 games played for Broncos. ... Sixth in team history with 64 1/2 sacks.

RULON JONES (1980)

Rookie year: A second-round pick, he played in all 16 games (one start). The NFL did not keep sack statistics until 1982, but play-by-play analysis credited Jones with a team-high 11 1/2 sacks, tied with Von Miller for most by a Broncos rookie.

Career: Started 99 of 129 games from 1980-88 and made the Pro Bowl in 1985-86. ... Ranks fifth in franchise history with 73 1/2 sacks. ... Credited with 34 1/2 sacks from 1984-86. ... His 13 1/2 sacks in 1986 are tied for fifth-most in team history.

KARL MECKLENBERG (1983)

Rookie year: The 310th player selected (seventh round), Mecklenberg played all 16 games as a rookie and had two sacks.

Career: Played entire career with the Broncos, starting 141 games of 180 games from 1983-94. ... Named to five Pro Bowls (1985-86, '89, '91 and '93). ... Third in team history with 79 sacks. ... Posted a team single-game record four sacks on two occasions (both in 1985). ... Had only one year of double-digit sacks (13 in 1985), but had eight years of at least seven sacks. ... Inducted to Broncos Ring of Fame in 2001.

SIMON FLETCHER (1985)

Rookie year: A second-round pick, he started only one game and had just one sack.

Career: Played entire 11-year career with the Broncos, starting 143 of 172 games. ... At least 11 sacks in each year from 1989-93. ... First in team history in sacks (97 1/2), multi-sack games (20, tied with Elvis Dumervil) and consecutive games with a sack (10, which is also tied for the NFL record). ... Inducted to the Broncos' Ring of Fame in 2016.

ELVIS DUMERVIL (2006)

Rookie year: A fourth-round pick, Dumervil played 13 games (no starts) and led the team with 8 1/2 sacks, which is tied for third-most by a Broncos rookie.

Career: Played first six years of NFL career with the Broncos (91 games) before moving on to Baltimore and San Francisco. ... Eighth in team history with 63 1/2 sacks. ... Tied a team record with four sacks against Cleveland in 2009. ... Tied with Simon Fletcher for most multi-sack games by a Broncos player (20). ... Led the NFL with 17 sacks in 2009 (second-most in Broncos history).

VON MILLER (2011)

Rookie year: The second overall pick started 15 games he played in and had 11 1/2 sacks (a Broncos rookie record tied with Rulon Jones) and made the Pro Bowl.

Career: Second in team history with 83 1/2 sacks. ... Named to Pro Bowl in each of his six full seasons ... Six years of at least 10 sacks ... Holds the franchise season record with 18 1/2 sacks in 2012. ... His 18 multi-sack games are second-most in team history.

“Bring the Mile High Thunder”: Denver Mayor Michael Hancock declares “Orange Friday” in honor of Broncos

By Jeff Bailey
The Denver Post
September 7, 2018

Alright Broncos Country, are you ready for Denver’s home opener against Seattle?

Michael Hancock, Mayor of the City and County of Denver, is ready and has proclaimed Sept. 7, 2018 to be known as “Orange Friday.”

Mayor Hancock sent a tweet out Thursday afternoon on his “Orange Friday” proclamation and is encouraging everyone in Denver, as well as Broncos fans worldwide to wear orange throughout the weekend.

And don’t forget to send your photos in on your social media accounts Friday to @PostBroncos and throughout the season with #DPBroncosCountry

The full transcript of the proclamation can be read below.

Proclamation

Whereas, this Sunday marks the return of football to the Mile High City as our Denver Broncos begin their campaign to achieve their fourth championship title; and

Whereas, the Denver Broncos will kick off their 2018 season here at home at Broncos Stadium at Mile High against the Seattle Seahawks; and

Whereas, on the ground of in the air, on offense or on defense, out Denver Broncos will against field a team worthy of the tradition of excellence we, as fans, have come to enjoy over the team’s long and storied history here in our great city; and

Whereas, as Broncos Country, it is our solemn duty as fans to bring the Mile High Thunder as we cheer on our team from the first game to the last; and

Whereas, the Denver Broncos are the city’s and state’s home team, and it is well known that Broncos Country is one of the most stalwart, reliable and best fan bases in all of professional sports; and

Whereas, everyone here in Denver and the fans of Broncos Country worldwide are encouraged to wear orange on Friday, September 7, 2018 and all weekend long to support the Denver Broncos.

Now, therefore, I, Michael B. Hancock, Mayor of the City and County of Denver, Colorado, by virtue of the authority vested in me, do hereby officially proclaim September 7, 2018 to be known as: “ORANGE FRIDAY”

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the official seal of the City and County of Denver to be affixed this 6th day of September, 2018 — GO BRONCOS!

Joseph Jones has a chance to become the Broncos' next Keith Burns

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 7, 2018

There was 2:19 left in the first quarter in the final preseason game last Thursday at Arizona when Joseph Jones made the team.

The Broncos' Marquette King had lofted a nice, high, 49-yard punt that Arizona Cardinals undrafted rookie Corey Willis thought he could return.

Bam! Jones flew in to make the tackle.

Though he is an inside linebacker by position, Jones is the Broncos' new Keith Burns. Make no mistake, Jones made the Broncos' 53-man roster because of his special teams play.

"That's my life right now," he said in the Broncos' locker room this week. "There are guys who have embraced their role and that's what I've done. I love [special] teams. I would play teams for 20 years.

Obviously, I want to make my way up and play linebacker, but I would be more than happy to go out there and ball out on teams for 20 years."

Burns played in 197 NFL games in 13 seasons – 11 with the Broncos – and had just three starts from 1994-2006. He was listed as a middle linebacker. He was really a core special teamer.

Jones was an undrafted rookie out of Plano, Illinois, and Northwestern last year. He spent his first NFL season with the Dallas Cowboys, Los Angeles Chargers and Seattle Seahawks before he finally made the 53-man roster with the Broncos for the final two months of the season.

As Joe moved from NFL city to city every few weeks, his wife Amber was left to care for their 1-year-old daughter Scarlett. And late last season, Amber started carrying their second daughter, Aurora, who was born three weeks ago.

Imagine the relief the Jones' felt when he made the Broncos' 53-man roster.

"Extremely happy," he said. "My wife is happy. I get to stay here with my family and not bounce around like I did last year. I've got a newborn so it's less stress on my wife to take care of a toddler and newborn by herself. Extremely grateful to be part of this organization. I love this team."

Not that the Jones' were told Joe had made the team. That's not how it's done in the NFL.

"It was more like no news is good news," Jones said. "They didn't tell me, so I just assumed no one upstairs wanted to see me. Both days [Saturday and Sunday] I was in getting treatment just taking care of my body, waiting for someone not to come up to me."

To be clear, it was Jones' complete body of work, not just one special teams tackle, that earned him a spot on the Broncos' season-opening roster. But Jones and another inside linebacker, Zaire Anderson, were in competition for the same spot. Anderson is the better linebacker. But the Broncos were awful on special teams last year and Jones' blast on Willis may have broken the tie.

"I definitely think it helped," Jones said, smiling.

As it so happened, the first guy who pounced on Jones after he made the open-field tackle to give him an attaboy? Zaire Anderson.

"I was sad to see him go," Jones said. "He's a good player, great guy. I'm sad he's gone."

Von Miller must take over if Broncos are to beat Russell Wilson and Seahawks

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 7, 2018

For starters, yes Case Keenum must play well in his first game for the Broncos.

But the key to the game Sunday against Seattle is stopping the other quarterback. The Broncos have just the player. No, we're not talking about their No. 5 overall draft pick rookie. We're talking about their No. 2 overall pick in the 2011 draft.

Von Miller must take over this game if the Broncos are to stop Russell Wilson.

"You know what? I say that every single game," Miller said. "I say that every single game. It doesn't always turn out like that. But the games where it does turn out like that, it's always special."

It's not that Wilson can't be sacked. In fact, quarterbacks who extend plays are often among the most sacked. Wilson was tied for the third-most sacked quarterback in 2015 with 45, tied for second in 2016 with 41, and was fourth last year with 43.

But it's those times he does escape that lead to big plays and big plays lead to victories.

The NFL is loaded with mobile quarterbacks. But there is mobile and there is elusive. Wilson is the most elusive quarterback in the league and has been for going on seven years.

"As a pass rusher you want a guy that when you get to him, and you touch him, they lay down," Miller said. "Russell is completely the opposite. Nobody likes playing Russell Wilson."

Miller can get to Wilson. They've met previously in one game, back in 2014 at Seattle. Miller got a sack. Wilson got the 26-20 win. (Miller was injured and didn't play in the 2013-season Super Bowl).

Since Miller was the Broncos' No. 2 overall pick in 2011, he has averaged 11.93 sacks a season. This year's No. 5 pick rookie is Bradley Chubb, Miller's new pass-rush mate. Miller sensed it was best to not offer Chubb any advice as he is about to make his NFL debut.

"When you're working with young guys, you can't make the situation bigger than what it is because they'll make it bigger than what it is," Miller said. "And you can't make it smaller than what it is, because they'll make it smaller than what it is."

"You just have to be even keel, and this is how I approach every single game. I just pull them along with me. I tell them what I'm looking at and I tell them how I'm feeling. It started yesterday with Wednesday, and I just lead by example when it comes to that. You can't really explain it to them."

"Bradley, he's an elite player, he'll feel it out immediately. He'll feel the difference between preseason and the regular season immediately. He's a great player to be able to adjust and continue to make plays

as well. I know that the type of impact that my words will have to say, 'Hey man, it's just another game.' Or you tell them, 'We've got to be on point this game. We have to make sure...' You have to watch what you say to rookies. You've just got to go out there and let them play."

The preseason lifted confidence Keenum and the Broncos' offense will play well Sunday. The question is whether Von Miller and the Denver D can contain the other guy.

Peyton Manning surprises transplant recipient during photo shoot

By Janet Oravetz

9 News

September 7, 2018

A recent lung transplant recipient got a big surprise from none other than former Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning.

Linda Regis was diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and struggled with the disease for years. The disease causes obstructed airflow from the lung and Regis' symptoms grew so serious that she needed and received a lung transplant nearly two years ago, according to a release from UHealth.

After her surgery, nurses recalled that Regis was confused as she came out of anesthesia and repeatedly asked where Peyton Manning was. After hearing the story, the hospital worked with Peyton Manning to invite Regis to the UHealth Training Center for the surprise of a lifetime.

With her health much better following the transplant, she and her family recently visited the UHealth training center. During the visit, Manning discreetly walked up and joined their family photo session.

UHealth and Peyton Manning also provided Regis with tickets to her first-ever Broncos game this week against the Seattle Seahawks.

Brandon Marshall still reaching to do better on, and off, the field

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 7, 2018

Brandon Marshall has read through all the mail. He has seen his name on social media and read the comments.

For some, Marshall will always be the Denver Broncos player who took a knee, in support of his former college teammate Colin Kaepernick during the national anthem in 2016. Marshall went to one knee before eight games in 2016 and in Week 3 in the 2017 season when many players around the league took a knee before the NFL's games that weekend.

Some of what he read and heard back then was supportive. Some of it shockingly hateful. But all, Marshall says, was necessary.

"I came through it in a good way, and I just realized it just recently," Marshall said. "I might see some criticism somewhere, online or whatever, and it doesn't affect me now. I think I'm better at looking at what's said, or what the forum is, how it's said, instead of this person or that person is just being critical and they don't know me, whereas before it was kind of like pressure. That they're saying this about me, I wonder what the organization is thinking or I thought maybe the organization thought that too."

After a season in Jacksonville, Marshall was signed to the Broncos' practice squad. When Wade Phillips became Denver's defensive coordinator in 2015, Marshall's career took off. Marshall played in 16 games that year, finishing with 102 tackles for a defense that finished the season ranked at, or the near, the top of every major defensive category and won Super Bowl 50.

Since he first knelt, he is one of two Broncos -- with receiver Demaryius Thomas -- who have remained in the tunnel during the anthem during this preseason. Moreover, Marshall has tried to do more than kneel to affect change. He has met with the officials of the Denver Police Department about use-of-force policies, donated money to local charities, and continued to try to build his foundation and help students learn leadership skills.

And all the while Marshall said: "I found myself still trying to be the best football player I could be and I didn't like how last year went. I want to be better and it's all together I think. Reach to do better in everything, you know?"

Marshall struggled with injuries in 2016 -- he played in 11 games -- and had 102 tackles in the Broncos' 5-11 2017 season. That only further stoked his desire for growth and change.

More recently, a photo caught Marshall's eye.

"It was Bill Gates," said the Denver Broncos linebacker. "I saw Bill Gates, just real quick, and it made me stop. I took a look."

The photo referred to some of the lessons in Randall Bell's book "Me We Do Be." Bell, a socio-economist who researched 5,000 professionals, including the likes of Gates and Buffett, tries to discern specific daily rituals and routines that most had in common.

One of Bell's statements says "If you make your bed in the morning, you're 206 percent more likely to become a millionaire."

"It just spoke to me," Marshall said. "I can't really say why, but at this point in my life, with everything that's happened, it spoke to me."

Marshall took the words that surrounded the photo to heart and it changed everything. And then Marshall "went and made my bed. Right then."

Some of Bell's lessons are common senses and some personal discipline: exercise, read more, wake up early, write things down. For Marshall, it's part of the changes he has tried to make in his life and with his teammates since first taking that knee in 2016.

"I'm still working on writing things down, I haven't really gotten that one all the way, but I am putting those things into my phone," Marshall said with a laugh. "So, that's kind of typing it ... I really believe there is a crossover in things, how you might do things in your personal life can affect how you do things on the field, just in terms of consistency as a person, things like that. I wanted to improve my consistency in my personal life and on the field."

Week 1 NFL score predictions: Viewers' guide for best games, more

By STAFF

ESPN

September 7, 2018

Sunday's games

Pittsburgh Steelers at Cleveland Browns (1 p.m. ET, CBS)

Point spread: PIT -3.5 | Matchup quality: 50 (of 100)

Jeremy Fowler's pick: The Steelers have won 11 games in Cleveland with Ben Roethlisberger as their quarterback, and though the Browns should be much improved, a passing offense ranked 20th or worse each season since 2014 inherits a quarterback (Tyrod Taylor) who barely averages 200 yards per game. That's a good matchup for a Steelers defense that thrives off rushing defense and limiting big plays downfield, while the Pittsburgh offensive line will be eager to get James Conner going. Steelers 27, Browns 21.

Pat McManamon's pick: An angry Steelers team is usually not a good thing for the Browns, who start with a new quarterback (Taylor), receiver (Jarvis Landry), running back (Carlos Hyde), left tackle (Joel Bitonio) and right tackle (Chris Hubbard), along with a new coordinator (Todd Haley) and new offensive system. It is not easy to bring that all together immediately. Steelers 24, Browns 17.

FPI win projection: PIT, 65 percent. FPI sees this as Cleveland's best chance at winning against the Steelers since Week 6 of the 2014 season, when Cleveland was a 56 percent home favorite. Every game since, FPI has had Pittsburgh as at least a 72 percent favorite.

What to watch for in fantasy: Conner seems likely to start at running back for the Steelers. So what if you draft Le'Veon Bell in your league? Read more.[Insider](#)

In case you missed it: All the possible Le'Veon Bell scenarios ... Gordon believes Browns' hope for his return is justified

San Francisco 49ers at Minnesota Vikings (1 p.m. ET, Fox)

Point spread: MIN -6.5 | Matchup quality: 59.4 (of 100)

Nick Wagoner's pick: Even before the injury to Jerick McKinnon and suspension for Reuben Foster, the 49ers figured to be facing an uphill battle against the Vikings. This week, coach Kyle Shanahan acknowledged that losing McKinnon was a serious blow to his game plan. The Niners have lost five consecutive road games to the Vikings. That streak continues. Vikings 27, 49ers 20.

Courtney Cronin's pick: The Vikings usher in the Kirk Cousins era at home. Minnesota's No. 1 defense has allowed 10 points or fewer in five of its past seven regular-season games. Cousins and his playmakers have been working all offseason to build their on-field chemistry, which involves spreading the ball around and placing an emphasis on Dalvin Cook, Latavius Murray and this explosive backfield. Vikings 27, 49ers 13.

FPI win projection: MIN, 70 percent. Jimmy G and the 49ers might have finished 2017 with a five-game winning streak, but a Week 1 road trip to Minnesota and FPI's top preseason defense is a big test.

What to watch for in fantasy: With McKinnon's injury, Alfred Morris has predictably been the most-added player in ESPN leagues the past week. Keep him on the bench in Week 1, though. [Read more](#). Insider

In case you missed it: How Kobe Bryant became 'essential' in Sherman's recovery ... Cousins' all-or-nothing pursuit kicks off against 49ers ... A perfect match? Garoppolo and the Bay Area's instant embrace

Cincinnati Bengals at Indianapolis Colts (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: IND -3 | Matchup quality: 38.2 (of 100)

Katherine Terrell's pick: The Bengals seemed quietly confident this week, and there's a reason for that. They have a new offensive and defensive coordinator, a revamped offensive line and healthy weapons in Tyler Eifert and John Ross. The Colts don't appear to have much of a pass rush, and the Bengals' talented defensive line can take advantage of the fact that this will be Andrew Luck's first game since 2016. Bengals 24, Colts 17.

Mike Wells' pick: The Colts have lost four consecutive Week 1 games, their starting left tackle just returned to practice for the first time in five weeks following a hamstring injury, and their starting running back just returned from a hamstring injury suffered Aug. 9. What the Colts do have going for them is that Luck is the healthiest he has been since Week 1 of the 2015 season. Colts 21, Bengals 17.

FPI win projection: IND, 61 percent. With Luck back in the fold, the Colts are FPI favorites in nine games this season after being favored only once in 2017. The Bengals can up their odds to make the playoffs to nearly 30 percent with a victory, but a loss drops them below 15 percent.

What to watch for in fantasy: Here's why A.J. Green and Ross have an advantageous matchup against this Colts defense. [Read more](#). Insider

In case you missed it: Luck 'excited' ahead of regular-season return ... Willis could be more than run-stopper for Bengals

Tennessee Titans at Miami Dolphins (1 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: TEN -1.5 | Matchup quality: 34.9 (of 100)

Turrón Davenport's pick: New offensive coordinator Matt LaFleur hopes to take advantage of the Dolphins linebackers with Dion Lewis and the tight-end combo of Delanie Walker and Jonnu Smith. The Titans secondary, bolstered by the addition of Malcolm Butler, will protect an early lead to give Mike Vrabel a victory in his first game as coach. Titans 24, Dolphins 17.

Cameron Wolfe's pick: The Dolphins should use their up-tempo offense and South Florida humidity to wear out the banged-up Titans front seven, but none of that will save them if they can't score enough points. Tennessee's route to a win seems simple -- Lewis, Derrick Henry and Marcus Mariota exploiting the Dolphins' struggles to stop the run. Titans 20, Dolphins 16.

FPI win projection: TEN, 50.4 percent. Tennessee is the most narrow FPI favorite of the week and could nudge its playoff probability just north of 50 percent with a win. Miami goes from Jay Cutler (43.5 Total QBR in 2017) back to Ryan Tannehill (48.6 in 2016), who missed last season due to injury.

What to watch for in fantasy: With Tannehill back, Kenny Stills could quickly emerge as a WR3. Read more.[Insider](#)

In case you missed it: After 637 days, 'riled up' Tannehill returns for real ... Vrabel to Mariota: Let it rip! ... Gase confident Dolphins can reclaim 2016 magic

Houston Texans at New England Patriots (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: NE -6.5 | Matchup quality: 59.4 (of 100)

Sarah Barshop's pick: Houston certainly has the playmakers to win in New England -- especially with a healthy Deshaun Watson, J.J. Watt and Jadeveon Clowney -- but it's hard to pick against a Patriots team that never has lost to the Texans at Gillette Stadium. It will be a close game like last season, but the Texans will come up short again. Patriots 30, Texans 24.

Mike Reiss' pick: Three of the Patriots' key starters -- Rex Burkhead, Marcus Cannon and Trey Flowers -- didn't play in the preseason, and the team enters the game with just three wide receivers who were with the club in training camp: Chris Hogan, Phillip Dorsett and Cordarrelle Patterson. Add in the fact that Jacob Hollister might not be ready, and it's asking a lot of the offense against the Texans' D. Texans 24, Patriots 20.

FPI win projection: NE, 73 percent. All eyes will be on the quarterbacks. Watson led the league last season with an 93.5 Total QBR at the time of his injury in November. The ageless Tom Brady finished the season third in QBR, the fourth consecutive season he's finished in the top five.

What to watch for in fantasy: Matthew Berry says Lamar Miller is a top-10 fantasy back in 2018. Read more.

In case you missed it: As Brady improves movement, 'broken-play coach' helps Patriots ... Are Texans for real? Week 1 is an early litmus test ... Where does 2018 WR corps rank among those in Belichick's tenure?

Tampa Bay Buccaneers at New Orleans Saints (1 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: NO -9.5 | Matchup quality: 48.1 (of 100)

Jenna Laine's pick: The Bucs won't have the suspended Jameis Winston, and their new pieces on defense -- defensive linemen Beau Allen, Jason Pierre-Paul and Vinny Curry -- haven't had enough time to jell to effectively rattle Drew Brees. The Saints also boast what Ryan Fitzpatrick called one of the league's "best home-field advantages," even if they historically have struggled in September. Saints 29, Bucs 21.

Mike Triplett's pick: Both teams will be missing star players because of suspensions. But the Saints' offense is still loaded without Mark Ingram. I'm surprised the betting line is flirting with double digits, even with Winston out. But this is practically a must-win game for a Saints team with Super Bowl aspirations. New Orleans can't afford another slow start after starting 0-2, 0-3, 0-3 and 0-2 the past four seasons. Saints 27, Bucs 19.

FPI win projection: NO, 82 percent. The Saints get the good scheduling fortune of catching Tampa Bay without Winston. Had Winston been available, New Orleans would still be the favorite, but closer to 75 percent.

What to watch for in fantasy: Michael Thomas got at least eight targets in 14 of his 16 games last season, and Matthew Berry thinks he could be the top-scoring WR in fantasy in 2018. [Read more.](#)

In case you missed it: Only Saints RBs on active roster are Kamara, Gillislee

Jacksonville Jaguars at New York Giants (1 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: JAX -3 | Matchup quality: 46.8 (of 100)

Mike DiRocco's pick: The Jaguars are 0-3 all time at MetLife Stadium, but this is by far the best team they've brought to New Jersey. The marquee matchup is Jalen Ramsey vs. Odell Beckham Jr., but don't get sidetracked. The Jaguars' run game, with the addition of Andrew Norwell and a slimmed-down Leonard Fournette, will determine the outcome. Jaguars 25, Giants 16.

Jordan Raanan's pick: The revamped Giants offense finally takes the field with Beckham and Saquon Barkley. That should help a unit that scored 13.6 points last season with Beckham either limited or out with injury; the Giants average 23 points with him at or near full strength. The Jaguars were the No. 2 scoring defense last season, and ranked second with 55 sacks. That's a problem for the new-look Giants offensive line, which still has problems on the right side. Jaguars 21, Giants 20.

FPI win projection: NYG, 51 percent. Will a healthy OBJ, plus the addition of Barkley, be enough on offense for the Giants to overcome the most efficient defense from 2017? It might come down to whether they can protect 37-year-old quarterback Eli Manning.

What to watch for in fantasy: Should you start Beckham against Ramsey this week? Ramsey might not shadow him, but here's why OBJ should be downgraded. [Read more.](#) Insider

In case you missed it: Inside Jalen vs. OBJ, from those who have faced them ... Ramsey is OBJ's toughest matchup yet ... How Bouye will factor into Jags' success vs. Giants

Buffalo Bills at Baltimore Ravens (1 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: BAL -7.5 | Matchup quality: 41.3 (of 100)

Mike Rodak's pick: Baltimore's defense allowed the NFL's 10th-fewest passing yards in 2017. The chances seem low of seeing new Bills offensive coordinator Brian Daboll, quarterback Nathan Peterman and an offensive line that struggled this preseason all click immediately in a road opener. Ravens 20, Bills 13.

Jamison Hensley's pick: Since 2008, Baltimore is 5-1 when opening the season at home, with an average margin of victory of 17.2 points. To make matters worse for the Bills, the Ravens return every starter on defense, and their pass rush has been dominant this preseason. That spells a long day for Peterman. Ravens 20, Bills 6.

FPI win projection: BAL, 84 percent. Baltimore is FPI's biggest favorite of the week, partially because the Bills are starting Peterman, who finished last season with a 12.4 Total QBR in limited action.

What to watch for in fantasy: Fantasy's No. 7 running back from 2017 did not suddenly get too old to do it again -- Eric Karabell ranked LeSean McCoy as one of the top RB2 options this week. Read more.[Insider](#)

In case you missed it: Starting Peterman not a surprise, despite '17 disaster ... Ravens' secret weapon? Jackson 'absolutely' ready to play

Kansas City Chiefs at Los Angeles Chargers (4:05 p.m. ET, CBS)
Point spread: LAC -3.5 | Matchup quality: 56.2 (of 100)

Adam Teicher's pick: Kansas City's defense looked fundamentally bad in a lot of ways during preseason. The Chiefs will need to score into the 30s to beat the Chargers, and that's a lot to ask of Patrick Mahomes in his first full season as a starter against a good defensive opponent. Chargers 34, Chiefs 26.

Eric D. Williams' pick: The Chargers have lost eight straight to the Chiefs, but they finally will put an end to that losing streak Sunday. Defensive coordinator Gus Bradley will figure out a way to pressure Mahomes, and a Philip Rivers-led offense should have its way with a Kansas City defense that likely will be missing its best player in safety Eric Berry (heel). Chargers 31, Chiefs 27.

FPI win projection: LAC, 62 percent. Mahomes is greeted to 2018 by an improved Chargers defense. Could be worse, but not by much.

What to watch for in fantasy: Be careful expecting too much from Mahomes against the Chargers' top cover corner, Casey Hayward, and their elite pass-rushers. Read more.[Insider](#)

In case you missed it: For Year 2 in L.A., Rivers turns to kickboxing and a sweet ride ... Changes to secondary threaten Chiefs' success against Rivers

Seattle Seahawks at Denver Broncos (4:25 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: DEN -3 | Matchup quality: 38.1 (of 100)

Brady Henderson's pick: The Broncos are 17-1 in their past 18 home openers, but there's more than history working against the Seahawks in this one. Dion Jordan might not be ready to help a pass rush that is already a major question mark, and it's not certain if All-Pro Earl Thomas will play after returning from his holdout this week. Broncos 21, Seahawks 20.

Jeff Legwold's pick: The Broncos hope to unveil their improvements on offense -- featuring new starting QB Case Keenum -- and hope their rookie class, with 10 on the current roster, fuels a rebound from 2017's 5-11 finish. Broncos 23, Seahawks 20.

FPI win projection: DEN, 55 percent. Was Keenum's 2017 -- when he finished second among qualifying starters in Total QBR -- an aberration? We'll get our first hint come Sunday ... especially if Thomas is on the field.

What to watch for in fantasy: One trend Matthew Berry is buying from the preseason? That Broncos running back Royce Freeman is a future star. Read more.

In case you missed it: Thomas ends holdout; Seahawks turn down second-round pick ... Keenum to get first real taste of new job in Broncos' opener ... Shaquem Griffin to start in Week 1

Washington Redskins at Arizona Cardinals (4:25 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: ARI -1 | Matchup quality: 33.3 (of 100)

John Keim's pick: The Redskins are 0-4 in openers under Jay Gruden, with 10 giveaways to only five takeaways. The solution? Quarterback Alex Smith, who is 4-1 in the past five seasons in the first game, with 12 touchdowns to four picks. Washington's offense is far from a finished product, and has a new starting back in Adrian Peterson. Redskins 21, Cardinals 17.

Josh Weinfuss' pick: Arizona will be unveiling new looks in Year 1 under coach Steve Wilks. The defense might be mostly stable, but the offense will be a large unknown aside from David Johnson being its centerpiece. It'll take the Cardinals at least a game to get used to everything new -- Wilks, his coaching staff, the offense with Sam Bradford, the defense and the 24 new players. Washington 24, Cardinals 17.

FPI win projection: ARI, 57 percent. These are two teams with new quarterback situations, and FPI actually predicts Smith and Bradford to be remarkably similar in quality on a per-play basis going forward.

What to watch for in fantasy: Here's a fact to know from Matthew Berry's 10 lists of 10: In the past three seasons, no quarterback has targeted tight ends more than Smith. Read more.

In case you missed it: Smith, Davis look to recapture 'great connection' with Redskins ... Peterson, Norman share same 'Mr. Miyagi' ... AD ready for big workload

Dallas Cowboys at Carolina Panthers (4:25 p.m. ET, Fox)
Point spread: CAR -3 | Matchup quality: 59.3 (of 100)

Todd Archer's pick: Offensively, the Cowboys have questions at wide receiver, tight end and will not have Pro Bowl center Travis Frederick for first time. They will be breaking in a new kicker in Brett Maher as well. The biggest question on defense is at safety, but their strength is the defensive line. The Panthers' weakness is an offensive line that is banged up and less than 100 percent to protect Cam Newton. The Cowboys defense must carry the day. Cowboys 23, Panthers 17.

David Newton's pick: Both teams are banged up on the offensive line, but the Panthers appear to be in better shape with right tackle Daryl Williams and guard/tackle Amini Silatolu returning to practice. Because it will be nearly impossible for the Cowboys to successfully rush against one of the best front sevens in the NFL with their injury situation, the Panthers get the edge. Panthers 27, Cowboys 10.

FPI win projection: CAR, 60 percent. Most believe Dak Prescott suffered a major sophomore slump, but Total QBR still had him as the fourth-most efficient quarterback last season. FPI is optimistic about Prescott in 2018 and beyond.

What to watch for in fantasy: Looking for a streaming option in Week 1? Rookie Cowboys wideout Michael Gallup should be an option. Read more.

In case you missed it: Elliott ready to prove he's NFL's 'best back' ... Newton begins next chapter of career after 'pretty amazing' first ... Jason Garrett 'embracing the youth' in critical year

Chicago Bears at Green Bay Packers (8:20 p.m. ET, NBC)
Point spread: GB -7.5 | Matchup quality: 54.2 (of 100)

Jeff Dickerson's pick: The Bears defense, led by new pass-rusher Khalil Mack, will no doubt keep the game interesting. But for all the offseason gains made by the Bears on both sides of the ball, the NFL is still a quarterback-driven league, and it's difficult to give the nod to Mitchell Trubisky over Aaron Rodgers. Packers 24, Bears 23.

Rob Demovsky's pick: The Packers have dominated this series of late, going 16-4 in their past 20 regular-season meetings when Rodgers has started. This opener has special meaning to Rodgers -- it's his first home game since he broke his collarbone at Minnesota in Week 6 last season. Expect it to be a memorable one. Packers 30, Bears 27.

FPI win projection: GB, 73 percent. FPI anticipates Chicago having the eighth-best defense in the NFL. Given the price the Bears paid for Mack, surely they're hoping for better than that.

What to watch for in fantasy: Anthony Miller faces a largely untested, inexperienced secondary, making him an interesting Week 1 flier. [Read more.](#) Insider

In case you missed it: No stopping Rodgers at age 34, 40 or perhaps beyond ... Bear or Packer? After playing for both, usually one sticks

Monday's games

New York Jets at Detroit Lions (7:10 p.m. ET, ESPN/ESPN App)
Point spread: DET -6.5 | Matchup quality: 36.3 (of 100)

Rich Cimini's pick: The Jets have a rookie quarterback in Sam Darnold playing behind an offensive line that didn't play together for a single snap in the preseason. The Lions have their own issues, especially on both lines, but they have Matthew Stafford and the home crowd. In the end, the Jets will be undermined by their woeful pass rush (only 28 sacks last season) and fans will be second-guessing them for not offering more for Khalil Mack. Lions 27, Jets 23.

Michael Rothstein's pick: It's a first-time head coach (Matt Patricia) facing a quarterback (Darnold) in his first start. Considering Patricia's familiarity with some of the Jets personnel and with coach Todd Bowles from his time in New England, that should be enough to help the Lions fluster Darnold. Detroit has won six of its past seven season openers and usually plays well on Monday nights, including going 2-0 last season. Lions 35, Jets 23.

FPI win projection: DET, 72 percent. FPI isn't giving Darnold much credit, hence the Lions' chances to win. If the rookie lives up to the hype, the model will quickly adjust.

What to watch for in fantasy: Isaiah Crowell is one of the game's strongest inside runners facing one of the weakest defensive interiors. Do you start him? [Read more.](#) Insider

In case you missed it: Jets rush Darnold into starting job, hoping for Carson Wentz ... Stafford knows what 'talented' Darnold faces

Los Angeles Rams at Oakland Raiders (10:20 p.m. ET, ESPN/ESPN App)
Point spread: LAR -4 | Matchup quality: 58.3 (of 100)

Lindsey Thiry's pick: The Rams open with a healthy roster, the highest-scoring offense from 2017, and a defense bolstered with the return of Aaron Donald and additions of Ndamukong Suh, Marcus Peters and Aqib Talib. Meanwhile, the Raiders are in a new system under Jon Gruden, and players must move beyond the organization trading star Khalil Mack to the Bears. Rams 27, Raiders 20.

Paul Gutierrez's pick: The Raiders enter Gruden 2.0 with more questions than answers, especially in the wake of the Mack trade and the team cutting Martavis Bryant. The Oakland natives are restless, the Raiders are facing an absolutely loaded Rams team, and this could get ugly early; as receiver Amari Cooper said, "We might have to go out there and score every possession." Rams 27, Raiders 17.

FPI win projection: LAR, 57 percent. Welcome back, Gruden. Now please try to handle Donald and Suh on the defensive line, Talib and Peters in the secondary, and Brandin Cooks and Todd Gurley ... without Mack. It will be fine.

What to watch for in fantasy: Cooper is probably too talented to bench in most cases, but consider it this week against this stout Rams defense. Read more.[Insider](#)

In case you missed it: Chucky Part II: Gruden tales from those who know him best ... McVay is 'the happy version of Gruden' ... What is the method to Gruden's madness in trading Mack? ... How will Gruden rate vs. other multiple-stint coaches?

'Nobody likes playing Russell Wilson': How the Broncos are preparing for challenge of Seattle's QB

By Nicki Jhabvala
The Athletic
September 7, 2018

Shane Ray has never played the Seattle Seahawks and has never actually chased down Russell Wilson, but he's certainly seen others try and usually fail. So Ray is playing in his mind just how it may go down Sunday when the Broncos host the Seahawks in their season opener.

"You get those little guys, those fast guys, like Russell," Ray began. "You're already converting so much energy rushing the quarterback, trying to beat your guy. Then you might beat your guy and he'll slip this way to run back this way, and you're still chasing him. It just adds a different dynamic to his game and it adds more to what we have to do as a defense."

Ray has no love for mobile quarterbacks — "I hate them," he said — especially the smaller and quick ones like Wilson. And Von Miller believes if a poll were taken of the league's pass rushers, not one would raise their hand in favor of playing against Wilson.

"As a pass rusher, you want a guy that when you get to him and you touch him, he'll lay down for you," Miller said. "Russell is the complete opposite. Nobody likes playing Russell Wilson."

The dual-threat quarterback is a menace to edge rushers, even the elite of the elite, like Miller. Throw in Wilson's 4.5 speed, his accuracy on the run and vision downfield, and the notion of a multi-skilled passer morphs into more like Kryptonite for opposing defenses.

Sunday will be a test for the newly-made Broncos, as they try to right a ship that got wildly off course the last two years. It will be a test especially for their defense, even with holdovers Miller and Ray, a mostly veteran front seven and a secondary that hopes it hasn't lost a step.

While most eyes will be on Case Keenum and the offense, the biggest threat facing the Broncos will surely be Wilson.

"He is the best movement quarterback in this entire league," coach Vance Joseph said. "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."

Although the faces around Wilson have changed this year, and although he's working with a new offensive coordinator (Brian Schottenheimer) and quarterbacks coach (Dave Canales), the Broncos expect the same from the veteran quarterback. Maybe even more.

But if any team is equipped to try to contain it, perhaps it's the Broncos, whose defense ranked in the top five in total yards, passing yards and rushing yards last season, and whose system is built to rush the passer.

The Broncos have essentially four starter-level edge rushers in Miller, rookie Bradley Chubb, Ray and Shaquil Barrett. They also kept six inside linebackers on the 53-man roster, in large part because of special-teams contributions.

But the depth gives them options.

Denver's NASCAR package, typically with three outside linebackers and a defensive end, was used in preseason to create pressure inside and out. Against the Redskins in the third week, the NASCAR package led to the first shared sack by Miller and Chubb. Defensive coordinator Joe Woods said Denver also has sub-packages to use three inside linebackers — Brandon Marshall, Todd Davis and rookie Josey Jewell — on the field at once.

"I've had the privilege, if you want to call it that, to coach against Russell several times over the years," Woods said. "We played them when I was in Minnesota a few times. He's an elite quarterback in this league. He knows what he's looking at, he knows where to go with the football, he can beat you with his arm and his legs. So it's going to take a team effort, a defensive effort, in terms of our rush plan, in terms of our coverage plan and a few things we're going to try to do to slow him down."

In his six-year career, Wilson has played the Broncos twice in the regular or postseason, with Super Bowl XLVIII his crowning jewel. The Seahawks' 43-8 blowout of the Broncos was the impetus for John Elway's defensive makeover, but that unit's first crack at Wilson also ended in defeat. In Week 3 of the 2014 season, Wilson led the Seahawks on an 80-yard game-winning drive in overtime that was capped with a touchdown run by Marshawn Lynch.

Wilson has never played in Denver, where the Broncos are 211-81 overall and 44-13-1 all-time in home openers. (Only once in the last seven years have the Broncos dropped a home opener.) And he arrives this week without the "Legion of Boom" secondary as a backstop and without many of the same offensive weapons that gave the Broncos fits in the past.

"It's a different look on the defense, but anytime you have a guy like Russell Wilson, you know you're going to have your hands full because the guy can make so many different plays," Elway said on his weekly address with the team's website. "So we're going to have to go out and hopefully contain him, keep him inside the pocket. That's easier said than done."

Many haven't been able to get it done against Wilson. Miller is the only Bronco still on the roster to have a sack against Wilson.

To fully understand the trouble he causes, consider the numbers:

-Last season, as Joseph alluded, Wilson had 30 runs of 10 yards or more to rank seventh in the league and tops among quarterbacks. Sitting just below him was Alvin Kamara, the Saints' star running back and the AP NFL offensive rookie of the year. Wilson's 131 career runs of 10 or more yards is tops in the league since 2012, when he was drafted.

-Since 2012, Wilson has averaged the third-most (34.1) rushing yards per game by a quarterback and has gained 188 first downs with his feet in that span (second-most).

-He owns the fourth-highest passer rating (98.8) over the last six seasons and, last year became the first quarterback in history with at least 30 touchdown passes and 500 rushing yards in multiple seasons.

-His 64.0 career completion percentage is 12th on the NFL's all-time list. Tom Brady sits a notch below at No. 13.

Trying to stop Wilson is a task Broncos defenders say is unlike any other, but one they'll have to reckon with Sunday.

"The D-linemen can't just necessarily rush freely," Marshall said. "Everybody has to keep their lanes and people have to keep contain — the outside rushers do — and we have to cover twice. When we think we have them covered, the guy can scramble and then he'll get open. We have to cover them longer unfortunately.

"It's going to be a tough day."

Broncos Von Miller enters season expecting career performance

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 7, 2018

The NBA once boasted Kobe vs. LeBron. Sunday at Broncos Stadium features Russell vs. Von. The winner of that matchup likely will determine game's victor.

Can Von Miller make Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson's life miserable with pressure? Will Wilson remain more elusive than a puma, darting and diving, leaving perplexed looks and missed tackles in his wake?

"Nobody likes playing against Russell, especially if you are a sack guy," Miller said. "He's great. Nobody likes facing him. But if it's what I need to do, I can do it."

Wilson is prepared for close encounters with Miller. He recognizes that Miller's 83.5 sacks since 2011 are the most in the NFL.

"He is going to make plays. It doesn't matter what you do to game plan for him," Wilson said.

Miller admits he enters every game focused on dominating his opponent. For that to happen Sunday, he needs help from his teammates. I talked exclusively with outside linebackers Shaquil Barrett and Shane Ray on Thursday about creating fair matchups for Miller. They believe they are better prepared this season to assist Von, who needs 15 sacks to eclipse Simon Fletcher as the all-time franchise leader.

"This year we have made it way harder to do that. Now if you do slide protection to Von, we have great matchups on the other side as well," Ray said. "Whether that's moving me to the middle or Bradley Chubb there, we have found a way to not only get Von more opportunities but to free up other guys as well."

The Broncos will lean on creativity. The key is forcing fair matchups. Von vs. one or two guys tilts in his favor. Denver will employ the NASCAR package -- three outside linebackers -- on occasion to create problems.

"If you put Von in a one-on-one, that's showing a lot of faith in your tackle," Barrett said. "Not even the best can block him all the time."

Broncos over-under odds say team will miss playoffs

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 7, 2018

Two lost seasons create pessimism.

Even with the addition of free agent quarterback Case Keenum and a promising rookie class -- all but one drafted player was a team captain -- the oddsmakers remain bearish on the Broncos.

Bovada released updated over-under odds Thursday, projecting the Broncos at seven wins. Seven carries weight in Denver. It represents the number of the franchise's greatest player, John Elway. He authored the first Super Bowl, defining a franchise that has more Super Bowl berths (seven) than losing seasons (six) over the past 34 years.

However, seven wins in this context carries a negative connotation. If the prediction holds, the Broncos will post back-to-back losing records for the first time since 1972. After suffering an eight-game skid last season, including one road victory, the Broncos believe a U-turn is imminent.

"Guys are hungry. We are connected. We are working hard," cornerback Chris Harris Jr. told Denver7. "It makes a difference when you like the guys you work with."

The challenge to rebound begins Sunday at home against Seattle. The Broncos are a 3-point favorite.

"It's important to get off to a fast start," said quarterback Case Keenum, who will be looking to start and win an opener for the first time in his career. "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. Putting in the work, obviously, and doing everything that you can, 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."

Miller, Wilson are big fans of one another, but not Sunday

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 7, 2018

Nobody has more sacks in the last seven seasons than Denver Broncos star Von Miller, who has dumped the quarterback 83 1-2 times since his Rookie of the Year debut in 2011.

Miller's sole sack of Seattle's Russell Wilson, whom he'll face for just the second time Sunday, came in 2014, eight months after the Seahawks throttled the Broncos in the Super Bowl with Miller sidelined by a knee injury.

Neither player seems particularly enthusiastic about facing the other in the season opener at Mile High Stadium.

"Russell's elite," Miller said Thursday. "Nobody likes playing Russell Wilson . He's just elite, best of the best. As a pass rusher, you want a guy that when you get to him and you touch him, he'll lay down for you. Russell's the complete opposite.

"He's probably THE most elusive quarterback out there. So, nobody likes that, especially if you're a sack guy."

Miller's been a big fan of Wilson ever since seeing him outshine Matt Flynn in an exhibition game at Denver in Wilson's rookie season.

"I feel like he's been great since his first couple of starts in the preseason, when was that, 2012, when he just went off in the preseason? I think he's been great. He really hasn't looked back since then," Miller said. "He's a great quarterback. He's done everything the right way, one of those guys who you want your kids looking up to. So, Russell Wilson is a great quarterback and I'm looking forward to playing against him.

"Not really."

Wilson is just as effusive in praise of Miller.

"He's one of those guys that's a game changer," Wilson said. "He can make some plays. I think the best thing for us is knowing where he is and playing smart football. When you're playing LeBron James, or you're playing guys like Kobe Bryant or Steph Curry, they're going to make their plays.

"He's one of those guys for sure."

Miller always fancied himself more of a Dirk Nowitzki.

"Yeah, I thought I was Dirk," Miller cracked. "It's great, especially coming from a guy like Russell. I already told you what type of player he is and what he means to the National Football League. So, for him to have those words for me are amazing.

"I still don't look forward to playing against him," Miller stressed. "But it's going to be a great game on Sunday."

Teams have long schemed to keep Miller from destroying their offensive game plans like he did in Super Bowl 50 with a pair of strip sacks of Cam Newton.

They tilt protection his way, chip him with tight ends and otherwise force him to beat double teams most of the time.

The addition of first-round draft pick Bradley Chubb should ease some of that attention .

The fifth overall selection in the NFL draft, Chubb earned a starting spot opposite Miller but the Broncos have the best depth at that position in the league and can also unleash former first-rounder Shane Ray and Shaq Barrett on quarterbacks.

"Von's still going to get chipped, and early on they're going to obviously test Bradley (to see) if he can win one-on-ones away from Von. If he does that, then we'll get more fair protections," Broncos coach Vance Joseph said. "But most teams are still going to turn to Von and chip Von. If they don't, he's going to take over the game.

"But it helps having Chubb opposite and having Ray opposite and even with our NASCAR package having our four pass rushers on the field. That's always a good deal, too. It creates more one-on-ones."

Chubb knows all about Wilson, who started three dozen games at NC State before transferring to Wisconsin.

"I actually got a chance to meet him when I was there at a game, so it was pretty cool," Chubb said. "I didn't watch him in college but now as a professional I see he makes plays with his feet and with his arms. He's a great player."

His interaction with Wilson basically consisted of asking for a selfie.

"It was more of a quick-type conversation. I came downstairs and he was right there and I said, 'Hey, can I get a picture really quick?' Took the picture, then he had to be on his way," Chubb recalled.

He'd love to run into Wilson again Sunday in Seattle's backfield along with Miller.

Seahawks, Broncos have lost star power in secondary

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 7, 2018

The Seattle Seahawks' "Legion of Boom" blew up with Kam Chancellor's neck injury and Richard Sherman's exit. The Denver Broncos' "No Fly Zone" was grounded by Aqib Talib's trade and T.J. Ward's departure.

Not so fast, insist the holdovers.

These two teams may not have the star power in their respective secondaries that they've boasted in years past, but they still have formidable, youth-infused defensive backfields expected to play leading roles in 2018.

When Talib was traded to the Rams this spring, he suggested the "No Fly Zone" no longer existed.

Nonsense, retorted cornerback Chris Harris Jr.

"I started the 'No Fly Zone,' so it's going to always be here," said Harris, who has some new co-pilots in cornerbacks Tramaine Brock, Adam Jones and Isaac Yiadom backing up Talib's replacement, Bradley Roby.

At safety, the Broncos had hoped to add some pop to go with Darian Stewart's heady play, and they acquired Su'a Cravens from Washington. But he's on IR with a sore left knee, leaving Will Parks and Dymonte Thomas to step up.

Behind Sherman's swagger, Seattle's secondary became a catchphrase across the NFL. The "Legion of Boom" was so well known the names of Sherman, Chancellor and Earl Thomas were always associated with that moniker.

Not anymore.

Sherman is now with division rival San Francisco. Chancellor's career is likely over after a neck injury suffered last season. Thomas is still around but he only returned to the team on Wednesday after a holdout that produced neither the contract extension nor the trade he hoped for.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph doesn't see much difference on film, however.

"That defense is more of a culture than it is a certain player," Joseph said. "They play hard, they play fast and that's what coach (Pete) Carroll brought there five or six years ago. 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."

If Thomas plays Sunday, it will likely be on a limited "pitch count" as Carroll described it.

Otherwise, Seattle's secondary features Shaquill Griffin and Dontae Johnson at cornerbacks, Bradley McDougald at strong safety and some combination of Thomas and Tedric Thompson at free safety.

Not quite "Boom" worthy just yet.

Griffin is on his way to being Seattle's next secondary star. He showed the skill last year as a rookie playing opposite Sherman and may eventually take over as the leader of the unit. Johnson was a starter last year in San Francisco, and McDougald may be one of Seattle's most versatile players with the ability to bounce between both strong safety and free safety.

"It's very reassuring Earl is back," McDougald said. "I'm happy he's here and I'm ready to get to work."

Other subplots as the Broncos try to extend the NFL's longest active winning streak in openers to seven:

STATING HIS CASE: QB Case Keenum , trying to help the Broncos avoid their first back-to-back losing seasons since 1971-72, figures his Denver debut got a little bit harder with Thomas ending his holdout.

He praised Thomas as one of the best safeties he's ever faced, insisted, "he can do some things on film that nobody else can do."

That said, Keenum likes his teammates and his chances.

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

SHAQUEM STARTS: Shaquill Griffin's twin brother, rookie linebacker Shaquem Griffin, is expected to start against the Broncos with K.J. Wright out following minor knee surgery. It's another chapter in the remarkable story of Griffin , who had his left hand amputated as a child. While Griffin is a superior athlete, he is undersized for the position and will be challenged both in the run game and trying to defend bigger tight ends Jeff Heuerman and Jake Butt.

HONORING T.D.: Royce Freeman is set to become the first rookie running back to start Week 1 for the Broncos since Hall of Famer Terrell Davis in 1995. Fellow rookie and local hero Phillip Lindsay, who starred at the University of Colorado, got Davis' blessing to rock his No. 30 jersey .

"As a running back, it's special to be able to wear T.D.'s number," Lindsay said.

COLORADO CONNECTION: Seahawks QB Russell Wilson was once a farmhand of the Colorado Rockies, who drafted him a day before his father died in 2010. "I'm very, very grateful for the Colorado Rockies organization and what they did for me and just gave me a chance and allowed me to take my mind off of my dad, who was my best friend. I'll never forget that," Wilson said.

The New York Yankees now hold Wilson's baseball rights, and while he's got a great gig now, "I think I'd look pretty good in them, wearing the pinstripes," Wilson said. "When you put on a Yankee uniform, they say you become immortal."

AP source: Kaepernick watches ad's TV premiere from Nike HQ

By Rob Maadi
Associated Press
September 7, 2018

As Colin Kaepernick watched from the apparel giant's headquarters in Oregon, Nike aired its highly anticipated ad featuring the quarterback known for his social protests during the NFL season opener Thursday night.

The spot highlighting the former 49ers quarterback locked in a grievance with the league aired during the first ad break in the third quarter of the Eagles-Falcons game, which started with no overt demonstrations by players during the national anthem.

A person familiar with the situation told The Associated Press that Kaepernick was watching the ad's first television airing on NBC at an event held at Nike's world headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because details of the visit were not announced publicly.

Still, some attendees posted accounts of the visit on social media, including video of Kaepernick speaking to a crowd Thursday several hours before the ad aired.

"You have to think beyond what you see around you," said Kaepernick, who hasn't spoken to the media publicly since opting out of his contract with San Francisco and becoming a free agent in 2017.

"You have to see the future that you believe in and that you want not just for yourself but all the people you see globally," he said.

Kaepernick's deal with Nike for the 30th anniversary of the "Just Do It" campaign was the most polarizing issue in sports this week, prompting heated debate on several topics including athletes protesting social injustice and Nike wading into political waters. Some fans responded to Kaepernick's sponsorship deal by cutting or burning gear with Nike's signature swoosh logo. Others argued the backlash and calls for a Nike boycott showed how debate has morphed beyond how to react to athletes trying to highlight issues like racial inequality and police shootings of unarmed minorities.

"I don't like what Nike did. I don't think it's appropriate what they did," President Donald Trump said in an interview with Fox News before a rally in Montana. "I honor the flag. I honor our national anthem and most of the people in this country feel the same way."

There were no clear-cut protests as "The Star-Spangled Banner" played before the game with both teams on the field and the song broadcasted nationally.

Eagles safety Malcolm Jenkins and defensive end Michael Bennett were on the sideline and neither really demonstrated during the song. Jenkins and Bennett regularly have either knelt or stayed off the field during the anthem to protest social injustice and racial inequality. They have been among the most vocal protesters since Kaepernick began similar demonstrations in 2016. Jenkins stood with teammates while Bennett wandered behind them near the Eagles bench and adjusted his equipment.

Jenkins said he thinks players should shift the focus of the debate away from the anthem itself and back to the issues they are trying to highlight.

"I think there's a huge need for us to turn the attention to not only the issues, but what players are actually doing in their communities to promote change," he said. "We're trying to move past the rhetoric of what's right or what's wrong in terms of the anthem and really focus on the systematic issues that are plaguing our communities."

No Falcons players were absent from the sideline and none has protested in the recent past.

The anthem has been a particularly thorny issue for the NFL, especially Trump urging owners to bench or fire players who demonstrate. Players say their message has been misconstrued into something against the American flag or the military.

Kaepernick's grievance against the league and team owners accuses owners of colluding to keep him off any roster. An arbitrator gave Kaepernick an incremental victory by allowing the challenge to go to trial.

Jenkins said Nike's commercial is changing the portrayal of Kaepernick in the public eye.

"Quite frankly, long after all of this is done (Kaepernick) will be looked at as somebody that changed this sport and changed the dynamics of all athletes in general in our country," Jenkins said.

The league and players union still haven't resolved whether players will be punished this season if they choose to kneel or demonstrate during the anthem. Owners approved a policy requiring players to stand if they are on the sideline during the song, allowing them to stay off the field if they wish.

But the league and union put that on hold after the Miami Dolphins faced backlash for classifying the protests as conduct potentially detrimental to the team — putting players at risk of fines or suspensions.

NFL national anthem kneeling question helps determine Miss America prelim winner

By STAFF

Associated Press

September 7, 2018

A question about the propriety of NFL players kneeling in protest during the national anthem helped select one of Thursday's preliminary winners in the Miss America competition.

Miss Virginia Emili McPhail was asked what advice she would give to players about whether to stand or kneel for the anthem.

She said not standing during the anthem "is a right you have. But it's also not about kneeling; it is absolutely about police brutality."

Speaking with reporters afterward, McPhail was asked if she was worried about alienating people who feel differently about the anthem protests, an issue that has deeply divided the country. Some NFL players say they kneel during the anthem to protest societal injustices and to push for change, but opponents, including President Trump, consider the gesture disrespectful.

"You're entitled to your own opinion, but I stood up for what I believed was right," McPhail said.

In the talent competition, Miss Louisiana Holli' Conway won for a vocal performance, singing "I Believe."

"It is something that would push me through when I had bad days," she said.

The second night of preliminary competition happened hours after signs appeared around Atlantic City on Thursday criticizing Gretchen Carlson, the chairwoman of the Miss America Organization, as "so fake" and a "bully."

Hung from traffic lights and glued to a utility box, signs appeared Thursday morning. They turned up at bus stops, as well. No one had taken responsibility for putting them up.

They reference claims from the outgoing Miss America, Cara Mund, who said that Carlson and CEO Regina Hopper bullied and silenced her during her reign, which ends Sunday.

Carlson, the former Fox News host and a former Miss America, said she had no comment. Both she and Hopper have repeatedly denied bullying Mund.

The signs appear to parody Carlson's book *Be Fierce*. They include the same photo of her that appears on her book cover, but with the words "So Fake" and "private bully, public liar."

In addition, someone hung a pageant sash on the Miss America statue just outside Boardwalk Hall, where the competition takes place, that reads "Gretchen Sucks."

This year's pageant is taking place amid a revolt by state organizations, most of which want Carlson and Hopper to resign; 46 of the 51 groups (the District of Columbia is included) have signed letters seeking their resignation.

They are unhappy with the way the decision to eliminate the swimsuit competition from the pageant was reached, among other issues.

Contestants from Florida and Wisconsin picked up wins Wednesday in the first night of preliminary competition.

Miss Florida Taylor Tyson won the talent competition for a piano rendition of "Mephisto's Waltz" by Liszt.

Miss Wisconsin Tianna Vanderhei won the onstage interview competition for her comments on how higher education should be more affordable and more widely accessible.

Scholarships totaling nearly \$506,000 will be awarded, including \$50,000 for the new Miss America; \$25,000 for the first runner-up; \$20,000 for the second runner-up; \$15,000 for the third runner-up, and \$10,000 for the fourth runner up.

The third and final night of preliminaries will be held Friday.

The next Miss America will be crowned Sunday night in Atlantic City.

Denver Broncos to tangle with Seattle Seahawks, their vastly depleted Super Bowl opponent

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 7, 2018

On my plane ride to Super Bowl 48 in New Jersey, I was startled awake by a Bronco party.

A jubilant woman was leading chants of “Broncos, Broncos, Broncos” and most passengers joined the chant, which was no surprise. We had, after all, departed from Denver.

Then a Seahawks fan stood up to loudly, and only half-seriously, demand the woman halt the chanting. This inspired her husband, Greg Thomas, to stand up and glare at the Seahawks protestor.

Thomas, a school principal and former college football star, stands a broad-shouldered 6-foot-6. The Seahawks protestor soon sat down. It was all in good fun.

When we landed at New York LaGuardia Airport, I talked for several minutes with Thomas about his son, Broncos tight end Julius. We agreed the football future of Julius was virtually unlimited. Julius had preferred basketball in college, playing for two NCAA Tournament teams at Portland State, before turning on a whim to football for his senior season.

Julius almost instantly became one of football’s best tight ends.

“The Lord gives us gifts, you know,” Greg said of his son.

I’ve been thinking about Greg and Julius this week as the Seahawks and Broncos prepare to tangle in Week 1 of the NFL season. So much seemed ahead on that night in New York when I talked to a proud father. Julius looked on his way to catching NFL passes for another seven or eight seasons, at least.

Julius retired Aug. 24, chased from the game by a foot injury. Always a superb student, he plans to pursue a PhD in psychology and study football’s toll on the brain.

The rapid exit offers a quick summary of the modern NFL. Change is the norm. Free agency, injury and an occasional trade transform teams almost beyond recognition.

The Seahawks, on a day that will live in Colorado infamy, devoured the Broncos, 43-8, on Feb. 2, 2014. (The Broncos had been two-point favorites.)

On Sunday, 1,679 days later, the Seahawks and Broncos tangle again at Mile High. These teams have only a vague resemblance to the mighty squads that met in New Jersey. (Thanks to Gazette colleague Doug Fitzgerald for uncovering the vast changes.)

Demaryius Thomas is the only Broncos starter still with the franchise. (Von Miller missed the game with a knee injury.)

The Seahawks are altered, too, though not as altered as the Broncos. Seven starters remain with the franchise, including safety Earl Thomas, who ended a contract standoff this week.

Teams didn't always change so quickly. Randy Gradishar and Tom Jackson walked through life as two utterly different personalities who shared little other than the desire to pulverize ball carriers. They played linebacker side-by-side for a pulverizing Bronco decade, 1974-1983.

Karl Mecklenburg, a superb linebacker/end, and Dennis Smith, a vicious safety, led Denver's defense together with brain-rattling hits from 1983-1994.

In yesteryear, NFL games resembled a long-running TV series. The same characters, season after season, playing the same roles in different dramatic situations. Continuity was common.

The Broncos and Seahawks are vastly different, but here's the main thing that's changed since Feb. 2, 2014:

The teams' might.

The Seahawks featured one of NFL history's most terrifying defenses, the "Legion of Boom." The Broncos countered — pitifully, as it turned out — with a mighty offense.

During the 2013 season that ended in the Super Bowl disaster, the Broncos and Peyton Manning scored 606 points, best in the NFL. In 2017, the Broncos offense led (kind of) by Trevor Siemian scored 289 points, 27th in the NFL.

The Seahawks of 2013 allowed 217 points, fewest in the NFL. The 2017 Seahawks were merely mediocre, surrendering 332 points, 13th in the NFL.

Neither of the teams that met in Super Bowl 48 is considered a contender for this season's Ultimate Game. The franchises are searching for new identities.

Maybe on Sunday, amid all the change, one of the teams will begin to find itself.

Nearly two years in the making, Jake Butt set for NFL debut on Sunday

By Zach Pereles
DenverBroncos.com
September 7, 2018

It was Dec. 30, 2016 when Jake Butt walked off the turf at Hard Rock Stadium in Miami, his head covered by a towel after a Florida State defender's helmet collided with his knee. It served as a bitter end to an illustrious career at the University of Michigan. The two-time first-team All-American and 2016 recipient of the John Mackey Award, given to the nation's top tight end, had torn his ACL.

It's an injury that caused Butt to slide all the way to the fifth round of the 2017 NFL Draft and then kept him sidelined for all of the ensuing NFL season. Though Butt did see some action this preseason, the Broncos' opener on Sunday will mark 618 days since he's played a game that counted for his team's record.

The Ohio native caught nearly 100 passes over his final two years as a Wolverine, and his abilities as both a pass catcher and a blocker caught the eye of NFL talent evaluators. Even though he now sports a knee brace and received limited preseason snaps, Butt feels like he can contribute in a major way in his regular-season debut.

"Yeah, I feel ready," Butt said. "Practice is no cakewalk either. We've got a lot of good guys on defense. We treat practice like it's a game. I am ready. I'm ready to go play all four quarters."

Though Butt was certainly disappointed to miss last season, he believes being able to watch and study professional action up close for a year helped him be far ahead of where he would have been as a first-year rookie.

"Mentally I just feel more sharp," Butt said. "The game happens a lot faster, so you need to understand the offense and understand defenses a lot quicker. You need to play faster. You need to be bigger and stronger. So I think I've been doing a good job developing some of those things and trying to carry them into the games."

Butt saw action with the first- and second-teams throughout the preseason and is listed as the team's second-string tight end behind Jeff Heurman. He pulled in a 5-yard pass from Case Keenum late in the first quarter of the third preseason game, against Washington, for his first in-game catch in nearly 20 months. He should see the field plenty on Sunday.

He's trying to stay in the moment, but he's also excited to make a return to the game he loves.

"Pretty grounded," said Butt regarding his emotions on Wednesday. "I'm not too high or too low. It definitely feels like a long time, but at the same time, you look back and the time has really flown by. Mainly, I'm just excited. I'm excited to play a full game. I'm excited to go make some plays and try to get a win for my teammates."

Butt's college career ended with him slowly walking off the field surrounded by medical staffers with his head down. If all goes to plan Sunday, he'll walk off surrounded by teammates with his head high and a win secured.

He's certainly waited for it long enough.

Broncos to provide fans with rally towels made from recycled materials before season opener vs. Seattle

By STAFF

DenverBroncos.com

September 7, 2018

The Denver Broncos will provide fans 21-and-up attending 'Orange Sunday', the team's regular-season home opener against the Seattle Seahawks (2:25 MDT kickoff), with orange rally towels, presented by Bud Light, made from 100 percent recycled materials.

Believed to be the NFL's first promotional giveaway made from fully recycled materials, the towels are made from plastic Coca-Cola bottles. A detailed example of a localized version of the process is below:

Coca-Cola bottles get hauled from Broncos Stadium at Mile High to the Waste Management – Denver Recycling Center on Franklin Street.

The bottles are then delivered to a Materials Recovery Facility and sold to one of the United States' plastic processing plants.

The processing plant sells either flake or pellets to yarn manufacturers and the yarn manufacturers sell the yarn to fabric weavers and knitters across the world.

Fabric makers sell the fabric to cut-sew and decorating plants, where the towels are produced and decorated.

Quote from J.T. Marburger CEO/Founder Circular Solutions Advisor and Consultant to Coca-Cola

"I have built Circular Economy programs for major international sporting events around the world and this is our first program with the NFL. Recycling has no value unless new products are made from the recycled material. We are excited the Broncos are taking a leadership role and demonstrating this to their fans and the local community."

Quote from Antionette Williams, Account Executive, Prestige Properties, Swire Coca-Cola, USA, Stapleton Facility

"The Denver Broncos and Coca-Cola are teaming up to show fans the value of recycling. Recycling is the first step, but Coca-Cola and the Broncos want to create a 'Life-Cycle' story and make sure once the bottles are recycled they continue on a sustainable path."

Quote from Danny Papilion from G&G Outfitters, NFL Licensee

"We have never executed a promotion to this nature for any NFL team where the giveaway was made 100 percent out of certified recycled PET bottles collected from their own waste. To our knowledge, the Broncos are the first NFL team to do so."

John Elway, Case Keenum, Von Miller and more than 40 Broncos attending fourth annual Taste of the Broncos, presented by King Soopers

By STAFF

DenverBroncos.com

September 7, 2018

Denver Broncos President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway will headline the VIP Reception for the fourth annual Taste of the Broncos, presented by King Soopers (Monday, 5:30-9 p.m.).

Quarterback Case Keenum, outside linebacker Von Miller and more than 40 other Broncos are also confirmed to attend the event taking place at Broncos Stadium at Mile High's Noble Energy Sports Legends Mall.

General admission, early admission and VIP tickets for the event can be purchased at www.Ticketmaster.com.

Early admission permits entry half an hour before the 7 p.m. general admission start time. VIP guests have access to a special pre-event appetizer and cocktail hour in the Broncos' home locker room at 5:30 p.m.

Proceeds from Taste of the Broncos will benefit Denver Broncos Charities and Food Bank of the Rockies. Through the generous support of event partners and attendees, the event has provided more than 765,000 meals to people in need through the Food Bank of the Rockies since 2015.

Restaurant and Entertainment Information

For the fourth consecutive year, Chef Troy Guard of TAG Restaurant Group will serve as the lead chef for the event. Face Vocal Band from Boulder, Colo., will be the headlining entertainment.

Restaurants will be grouped together in four quadrants, hosted by each the of the event's premier Touchdown Sponsors: King Soopers, JBS, U.S. Bank, and TABASCO.

Below is a complete list of 2018 participating restaurants:

Acorn/Bridler

Elway's

Hickory & Ash

Señor Bear

Beast + Bottle

Epicurean

High Point Creamery

Sushi Ronin

New Alaska Airlines jet with Russell Wilson image flying to Denver in time for Broncos game

By Patti Payne
Denver Business Journal
September 7, 2018

Seattle Seahawks quarterback Russell Wilson is kicking off the NFL season with style, with a new Alaska Airlines plane and his own Wheaties cereal box both sporting his image.

Alaska Airlines is unveiling a new Russell Wilson-branded plane just in time to fly passengers to Denver this Friday, Sept. 7, to the opening game with the Broncos. The Boeing 737-800 jet will include giant images of Wilson, and the aircraft door will include Wilson's tagline, "Dream Big. Fly High."

Throughout football season, Alaska Airlines passengers wearing a Wilson jersey will enjoy early boarding on all flights departing from Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

"I love putting on my No. 3 jersey for the first game of the season," said Natalie Bowman, Alaska Airlines' managing director of brand and marketing communications. "At Alaska, we're excited to show our hometown pride, support our quarterback, and send fans to Denver in true football fashion."

Meanwhile, starting in October, Wilson's image will appear on boxes of Wheaties.

In an article for "The Players' Tribune" Sept. 4, entitled "The Box," Wilson said when he was a kid in the 1990s and his family went to the grocery store, he and his brother would race down that aisle looking for the Breakfast of Champions boxes.

"It was a thing, man. It was a huge deal. We'd be running down the aisle, like, 'WHO'S ON THE WHEATIES BOX?' It's MJ!!!!!!!!!! It's Elway!!!!!!!!!! It's Junior!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

He said the Michael Jordan Space Jam box from 1996 was a classic, and he recalled how they carefully set the box on the table with the front facing them as they ate breakfast and stared at whoever was pictured there. And they'd picture themselves on the box someday.

Wilson said his father taught him three words that have served as the most powerful lesson in his life: "Whenever someone was doubting me," Wilson wrote, "or I was doubting myself, he used to say, 'Why not you?'"

"I truly understand how powerful it is," Wilson wrote. "He convinced a too-small African American wannabe NFL quarterback to look at a picture on a cereal box and think, 'Why not me?'"

Colin Kaepernick's Nike commercial is a big hit with consumers, according to industry group

By Charles Robinson
Yahoo! Sports
September 7, 2018

The videos of burning sneakers and mutilated socks. The social-media echo chamber of fury and snarky Nike memes. And, of course, President Donald Trump's inevitable Twitter firebomb – as reliable as the sunrise. If you were seeking anger over the union of the shoe giant and Colin Kaepernick, the Internet provided a seemingly inexhaustible buffet of offerings the past several days.

But according to a leading advertisement consulting service, Kaepernick's first commercial registered as a big hit with consumers. The "Dream Crazy" ad scored high marks with a broad base of the consumer population, according to Ace Metrix, a company that provides real-time impact and analysis data surrounding major advertisements.

The commercial – featuring Kaepernick urging viewers to "dream crazy" and "believe in something" – registered in the 10th percentile of Ace Metrix's "polarity" score. In layman's terms, it means that 90 percent of advertisements traced by Ace Metrix were found to be more polarizing among viewers. That's significant, considering Ace Metrix boasts having tracked over 2,500 brands and more than 80,000 advertisements since 2010.

According to data released by Ace:

- " 'Dream Crazy' saw strong resonance among [Generation] Z and Millennial audiences [on average, Ace Scores were 33% above norm]," the company said in a statement Thursday. "Older viewers, those among [Generation] X, positively regarded the ad as well, but to a lesser degree than those younger than them."
- Ace Metrix polled consumers on how Kaepernick's signing would impact their plans to spend money with Nike. Thirteen percent of those surveyed said they were less likely to purchase from Nike after viewing Kaepernick's first ad. That percentage was down to 10 percent among millennials and 6 amongst Generation Z. Conversely, a staggering 56 percent of those surveyed said they were more likely to purchase from Nike after seeing the commercial.
- Ace Metrix analysis suggested Kaepernick's first commercial with Nike had a positive reaction on par with the apparel company's recent tribute ad to Serena Williams, who is considered one of the crown jewel endorsers for the company. Both the Kaepernick ad and the recent tribute commercial for Williams scored very highly with consumers in positive reaction and resulting likelihood of purchasing Nike products.

"These results show once again that oftentimes, social-media backlash can be amplified by media attention while representing only a small minority of haters," Ace Metrix CEO Peter Daboll said in a statement. "Nike is to be commended for executing the messaging so well in this ad. Most objections to such a polarizing figure as Kaepernick were tempered by the very strong likeability of that message across age, gender and ethnicity."

The positive impact of Kaepernick's advertisement wasn't the only good news for Nike, either. Apex Marketing – which analyzes the value of social-media impact on brands – reported that in the first three days after the announcement of Kaepernick as a spokesperson, Nike reaped “buzz” mentions that equated to \$163.5 million in value. Which means Nike would have had to have doled out that much money to receive the same kind bang it received from the Kaepernick announcement.

Top 10 linebacker units: Broncos, Bears lead rankings

By Chris Wesseling
NFL.com
September 7, 2018

Not so long ago, it was fairly easy to categorize NFL defenses as 3-4 or 4-3, depending on the coordinator's scheme and how many players he deployed at the line of scrimmage. In recent years, though, there's been a shift toward hybrid schemes that allow defenses to alter alignments based on their understanding of the offense's intentions in each specific situation.

That evolution has added a layer of complexity to linebacker evaluations, as bone-jarring run stuffers often give way to rangier coverage specialists or even cornerbacks and safeties in passing situations. Off-the-ball linebackers in 4-3 defenses, particularly, are perennially underappreciated in Pro Bowl and All-Pro balloting.

Even in a time of transition, this past offseason stands out as a jarring one for linebacker corps. Between defections, injuries, retirements and suspensions, the best front sevens in the NFL are under construction.

The Panthers will be without Pro Bowler Thomas Davis for the first four games. The Bengals are dealing with Vontaze Burfict's annual September absence. The Seahawks have to cover for K.J. Wright until he returns from knee surgery. The Jaguars are filling Paul Posluszny's shoes with a seventh-round rookie. The Titans are waiting for rookies Harold Landry and Rashaan Evans to get healthy and up to speed.

Perhaps no team better encapsulates the uncertainty at linebacker than the Steelers. Mike Tomlin's defense collapsed down the stretch last year when Ryan Shazier went down with a career-threatening spinal injury. One of the better linebacker groups in the league suddenly looks vulnerable, with defined roles for limited holdovers Bud Dupree (run stuffer), T.J. Watt (coverage specialist) and Vince Williams (blitzer).

As we embark on the 2018 season, teams such as the Cardinals, Colts and Raiders are adjusting to 4-3 schemes -- just as clubs featuring 3-4 schemes such as the Steelers, Chiefs, Rams and Giants are trying to patch holes. That goes a long way toward explaining why the Bears can skyrocket up the rankings with an early September blockbuster.

Here is how we rank the best linebacker units in the league:

1) Denver Broncos

Notables: Von Miller, Bradley Chubb, Brandon Marshall, Todd Davis, Shaquil Barrett, Shane Ray, Josey Jewell.

Analysis: The Broncos have it all. With the addition of Chubb, the No. 5 overall draft pick, it is one of the few defenses that can boast a pair of bookend pass rushers with game-wrecking potential. In Barrett and Ray, there's quality depth. To the underrated inside duo of Marshall and Davis, Denver added a promising rookie in Jewell. This defense might not be quite as dominant as the one that delivered the Lombardi Trophy in Super Bowl 50, but it could be one of the most improved units in the league.

2) Chicago Bears

Notables: Khalil Mack, Leonard Floyd, Roquan Smith, Danny Trevathan, Nick Kwiatkoski, Aaron Lynch.

Analysis: Even before the earth-shattering Mack trade, the Bears had an intriguing defense with Butkus Award winner Smith joining Trevathan and Floyd at linebacker. The big question was whether savvy coordinator Vic Fangio could fix his pass-rushing problems by reuniting with Lynch, whom he coached with the 49ers in 2014, and resuscitating his career. Now that Mack is on board, Chicago is a dark horse candidate to emerge as the NFL's top defense.

3) Carolina Panthers

Notables: Luke Kuechly, Thomas Davis, Shaq Thompson, David Mayo, Ben Jacobs, Jermaine Carter.

Analysis: Kuechly is a future Hall of Famer if he stays healthy. Thompson is ascending just as Davis reaches his decline phase, ensuring that the Panthers have two quality linebackers on the field at all times. Carter, a rookie, looms as a wild card on the heels of a promising preseason performance.

4) Seattle Seahawks

Notables: Bobby Wagner, K.J. Wright, Barkevious Mingo, Shaquem Griffin, Jake Martin.

Analysis: In the discussion for Defensive Player of the Year honors most seasons, Wagner is Kuechly's chief competition as the game's premier middle linebacker. The ideal weakside 'backer in Pete Carroll's system, Wright is recovering from an August knee scope. Fifth-round rookie Griffin, one of the best stories in sports, will fill in as the starter while Wright is out. Mingo and Martin are slated for the old Bruce Irvin role as edge-rushing specialists.

5) Houston Texans

Notables: Jadeveon Clowney, Whitney Mercilus, Benardrick McKinney, Zach Cunningham.

Analysis: Credit Houston with a smart succession plan for Brian Cushing at inside linebacker, drafting McKinney in 2015 and Cunningham in 2017. As solid as that duo might be, this linebacking corps rises and falls with the health of Clowney and Mercilus. The latter racked up 19.5 sacks in 2015 and 2016, only to have his 2017 season ruined by a torn pectoral muscle. Clowney finally made good on his prodigious potential with an All-Pro-caliber campaign but is coming off a knee scope of his own.

6) Minnesota Vikings

Notables: Anthony Barr, Eric Kendricks, Ben Gedeon.

Analysis: While Barr has been honored with three consecutive Pro Bowl selections, it's leading tackler Kendricks who is the heartbeat of Mike Zimmer's defense. Limited to early downs as a fourth-round rookie last season, Gedeon showed promise against the run. This is one of the few defenses that can feature high-octane units at every level, from the defensive line to the secondary.

7) Baltimore Ravens

Notables: Terrell Suggs, Matt Judon, C.J. Mosley, Patrick Onwuasor, Tim Williams, Za'Darius Smith, Kenny Young.

Analysis: Resistant to Father Time, Suggs remains one of the league's top all-around outside linebackers at age 35. Judon flashes pass-rushing potential that suggests double-digit sacks in his future. Don't sleep on 2017 third-round pick Williams, who turned heads in August. Mosley is one of the best inside linebackers in football, according to no less of an authority than Ray Lewis. Try as they might, the Ravens can't keep Onwuasor out of the lineup.

8) Jacksonville Jaguars

Notables: Telvin Smith, Myles Jack, Leon Jacobs.

Analysis: Smith is the headliner as a Pro Bowler with incredible range and closing speed. Jack improved throughout last season, emerging as a playmaker as well as a tight end's worst nightmare in coverage. He's moving to the middle this year, replacing franchise legend Posluszny. That opens up the weak side for Jacobs, an athletic seventh-round rookie who has caught on quickly.

9) Washington Redskins

Notables: Ryan Kerrigan, Preston Smith, Zach Brown, Mason Foster, Pernell McPhee, Ryan Anderson.

Analysis: Kerrigan is coming off the best season of his extraordinarily underrated career. He and Smith were one of the few tandems to combine for more than 20 sacks last season. A talented but frustrating tease early in his career with the Titans, Brown has developed into a fierce run stuffer on the inside.

10) Cleveland Browns

Notables: Jamie Collins, Joe Schobert, Christian Kirksey, Genard Avery.

Analysis: This unit took a hit when former Eagles linebacker Mychal Kendricks was charged with insider trading and subsequently released. What's left over isn't too shabby. A boon to the Browns' previously woebegone run defense, Schobert tied for the NFL lead in tackles as a first-time starter last year. Collins is a bounceback candidate after injuries derailed his first full season in Cleveland.

Just missed: Tennessee Titans, Atlanta Falcons, Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

The N.F.L. Struggles to Tackle Its Latest Problem: Tackling

By Bill Pennington

New York Times

September 7, 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.

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 Is Here, Like It or Not

By Jason Gay

Wall Street Journal

September 7, 2018

Another NFL season is upon us, and if you remain a fan of America's most tormented sport, I want to offer advance congratulations on the 24 hours of commercials you're going to watch this season. I'm not kidding: Chris Brantner of Streaming Observer writes that the average NFL fan watches 252 minutes of games per week during the regular season, which, multiplied by .3298 (the percentage of commercial time during an NFL game) comes to 83.1 minutes of commercial viewing. Multiply that times 17—the number of weeks in the NFL regular season—and you get 23.5 hours of ads.

Twenty-three-point-five! A full day of your life, devoted to commercials, most of them for cheap beer and male performance pharmaceuticals.

And some people have to watch an entire Tampa Bay Buccaneers season on top of that.

One of those commercials, of course, will be the new spot Nike's composed for Colin Kaepernick, the exiled quarterback who does not even play in the NFL anymore. One imagines the freakout from certain loud corners of NFL ownership. The league—I'm sorry, "the Shield"—thrives on control, and here's a high-profile league partner (Nike) going rogue on opening weekend with an ad campaign featuring a player currently suing the NFL for collusion.

Roger! It's _____. My Gulfstream pilot just told me about the ad. How did this happen?

It's pretty funny. Maybe NFL will be wearing Vineyard Vines next fall.

But I digress. Let's step out of the owner aircraft and get to the NFL action on the field, all 11 minutes per game of it. I'm pretty excited, to tell you the truth. Philly fans want a championship repeat, but there are fresh powerhouses (the Los Angeles Rams), some impressive entry-level talent (the Jets start rookie quarterback Sam Darnold in Week 1) and even the Cleveland Browns fans are feeling frisky. You may have read that there's a rush of bets in Las Vegas for the Browns to win the Super Bowl, which can mean only one of two things: 1) the apocalypse is here, and it's time to go into the shelter with the canned corn, or 2) humans actually think the Browns are going to be good, which I guess is the same thing as the apocalypse.

Pass me the canned corn! Let's get to pressing questions for NFL 2018:

Is there really going to be a Super Bowl featuring two Los Angeles teams?

Look, nobody wants to read a prediction of a Patriots-Eagles rematch. Boring!

A far spicier pick is something like the Rams vs. Chargers, two teams relocated to L.A. and still not playing in their own stadiums (the Rams play in the Memorial Coliseum, the Chargers play in a lost shopping cart from Ralph's Supermarket). I get the fuss over the Rams—they finished 11-5 last year and loaded up this off-season with new talent like Ndamukong Suh and Aqib Talib—but the Chargers are constitutionally

incapable of going a full season without stepping on a rake. I'm OK if you want to pencil in one L.A. team for SB LIII, but not two. Plus, it bugs the nice people of San Diego.

Tom Brady just turned 73. Is he still capable of playing at a high level?

OK: New England's Ponce de Leon is just 41. But he's making noise again about playing until 45. I am fine with this ambition. If Keith Richards and Mick Jagger can play rock 'n' roll into their 300s, I see no reason Brady needs to retire. Except it isn't really his decision. Said it before, but you don't retire from football. Football retires you.

Is former Brady apprentice Jimmy Garoppolo, now with the Niners, the next big league star?

San Francisco certainly hopes so, since they're investing in him like he's a Silicon Valley unicorn. Garoppolo has a short résumé, but it's an impressive one, and we all know he was whittled from Nantucket driftwood by the Grumpy Lobster Boat Captain himself, Bill Belichick.

Overall, the Niners appear to be a far stabler (see what I did there) Bay Area outfit than the Raiders, who have a new coach in Unfrozen 90s Jon Gruden, and are spending what could be their last pre-Vegas season collecting players old enough to remember rotary phones. I actually think Brady may be too young to play for the Gruden Raiders. Wait until he's 46.

What's the best story of the season?

Easy. Shaquem Griffin, who became a college football star despite having being born without a fully developed left hand—it was amputated when he was a child—starts Sunday for the Seattle Seahawks. Awesome.

Is it bizarre in New York, with all the optimistic Jets fans walking around?

Yes. The Jets appear to have a keeper in Darnold, seem to be under steady management, and fan expectations are optimistic but reasonable. It's like walking out to the living room and finding your dog playing the piano.

Has the Super Bowl halftime act been announced yet?

No. My bet is on Deep Purple. Or Paul Anka. Truthfully, the Super Bowl's in Atlanta, home to the most dynamic scene in hip-hop. If it isn't an Atlanta hip-hop spectacular, the NFL should just close down and become a frozen yogurt shop.

(I bet they go with Anka.)

Can't you just watch Red Zone to avoid all those commercials?

Yes, technically you can, as Streaming Observer noted. But I've always felt there's something unnatural/cheating about Red Zone—watching only the important moments in football games, it's like you're licking the frosting off the tops of cupcakes. You're supposed to eat the whole cupcake. The whole, miserable cupcake. Including the punting.

Hey! Isn't there a SuperDuperPunter?

Yes. The Seahawks drafted a punter named Michael Dickson, who apparently can punt it exactly where he wants it, which must mean he's an All-Pro, or a witch.

Are the Browns really going to win the Super Bowl?

Sure. Why not?

It certainly feels like the apocalypse is coming. Have you been reading the news lately? I'm in the basement already. Have some canned corn.

Seven Tech Trends to Watch as the 2018 NFL Season Kicks Off

By Jen Booton
Sports Techie
September 7, 2018

With the 2018 NFL season kicking off on Thursday, fans will be greeted with new ways to watch games, consume content and place bets on individual players and teams.

The league is expected to make strides with how it collects and utilizes data, sells tickets, and streams content. Perhaps most noteworthy, however, will be how the NFL embraces sports betting, which represents a completely new area of business this season.

Sports Betting

States such as New Jersey, Delaware and Mississippi are beginning to adopt a regulatory framework for sports betting. That means the 2018 NFL season will be the first in which sportsbooks outside of Nevada have direct ties to the league, some even operating from inside stadiums during games.

Last month, DraftKings launched a mobile sportsbook in New Jersey during a Browns-Giants preseason game at Metlife Stadium, marking the first NFL game in which fans could place bets from inside a professional football stadium. In Atlantic City, MGM Resorts now also offers a mobile sports betting option through its Borgata casino and the Android app PlayMGM. Casinos can now also advertise with NFL teams.

The sports betting landscape is still in its infancy, with the U.S Supreme Court only striking down PASPA, the federal law that prohibited sports gambling, in April. Leagues will need to work with sports bookers and data/media companies to find ways to generate additional revenue as this market evolves.

According to a recent Nielsen Sports report commissioned by the American Gaming Association, the NFL could see its revenue increased by as much as \$2.3 billion a year if it were to leverage the betting opportunity well. The gains would mostly stem from increased viewership, which would buoy ticket sales, as well as spending from betting stakeholders on advertising, media, data, and sponsorships.

Data Expands League-Wide

Heading into its fifth season with the NFL, Zebra Technologies will continue to provide its 0.1 oz., nickel-sized chips that track in-game player and ball movements on the field. Starting this year, however, the NFL will begin to disseminate that data more widely.

While teams were previously given redacted datasets about player movements (usually receiving one-sided information about their players without being able to see the movements of their competitors), that will begin to change this season. All teams will now receive global league-wide tracking data sets for the 2016 and 2017 seasons as well as weekly updates through the 2018 season. That could will help to unlock new analytic capabilities that might change the way teams think about strategy.

Wearables

The 2018 season will mark the second straight season in which players are outfitted with Whoop 2.0 wearable devices by their union. The devices allow them to measure and analyze biometrics such as sleep,

strain, and recovery. The NFL Players Association was the first players association in professional sports to partner with a wearable technology company. In 2017 it scooped up a stake in Whoop through its athlete-driven accelerator, OneTeam Collective.

In this new era of personalized tracking, leagues from the NFL to the NBA and MLB are trying to figure out how to best navigate the world of personalized health and performance data. Though the NFL's CBA is not set to expire until 2020, the Whoop deal could set the tone for the next wave of negotiations between the league and NFLPA, especially as sports gambling puts pressure on data collection.

Under the NFLPA's terms with Whoop, NFL players maintain ownership of their health data, but also may be able to commercialize that data through the NFLPA's licensing program. Sean Sansiveri, the NFLPA's vice president of business and legal affairs, said the union has planted a flag to get ahead of the curve, and plans to help athletes make money off their own data if they choose to do so.

Smarter Fantasy

Increased access to data and improved cloud-based technologies are leading to the development of more sophisticated fantasy sports services. Last month, San Francisco 49ers cornerback Richard Sherman announced that he was launching a daily fantasy sports site called Daily Number that will give fans the ability to craft their own lineups using any combination of players. Also this season, NBC Sports is launching a new kit on Rotoworld that will enable fantasy players from FanDuel, Yahoo!, and DraftKings to simulate up to 150 lineups, based on player projections, team statistics, and news.

Streaming

The NFL is drastically expanding its reach through streaming technologies this season. While Verizon for years had the exclusive rights to stream NFL games on smartphones, the NFL has been working since last season to ensure that fans can stream games to their mobile devices no matter which carrier they use. In 2018, anyone with a smartphone will be able to watch games.

All in-market games will be available to watch live in the NFL or Yahoo Sports apps, without needing to authenticate a cable subscription. The NFL said this approach could quadruple the number of devices with access compared to last season. (In 2017, the league suffered a decline in ratings.) The approach also from strategies used elsewhere that tend to only enable streaming for out-of-market games.

The NFL also renewed its Thursday Night Football deal with Amazon's Prime Video and partnered with Snapchat on content creation. CBS, meanwhile, plans to stream the Super Bowl for free.

Ticketing

The 2018 season will mark the first full season since the NFL expanded its partnership with Ticketmaster in an attempt to control more secondary-market sales. When the NFL first announced that expanded partnership in October, it described the deal as one that would increase safety and reduce ticket fraud. While that may be true, mobile and digital ticketing also provides teams important data about the people who attend their games, which they can use to tweak products, services, and promotions.

A number of teams have been experimenting with mobile-first ticketing programs and many have announced secondary-market partnerships with the league via Ticketmaster over the past 11 months. The New England Patriots, for example, launched a secondary ticket exchange in partnership with Ticketmaster for the 2018 season that allows fans to securely buy and sell tickets through Patriots.com.

Key to these deals is the NFL's use of Ticketmaster venue software called Presence, which represents a move to a paperless, digital ticketing system that will make it easier for fans and teams to adapt to mobile-first ticketing systems.

Concussions

The NFL continues to promote safety efforts to reduce head injuries, including putting new rules in place to try to mitigate impacts. The 2018 season will mark the first season in which the league's new helmet rule will be implemented. A player who lowers his head when initiating contact with the helmet of an opponent will be penalized.

The helmet rule comes as the league continues to crowdsource new technologies in an attempt to reduce on-field head trauma. Earlier this summer, the league hosted its latest HeadHealthTech Challenge to identify the most innovative products from companies attempting to reduce the rate of concussion. The league continues to search for technologies that will help to protect players from head injury, rewarding winners large sums of money to accelerate their research and development. Applications for next year's HeadHealthTech challenge will remain open through Sept. 13.

There were 28 penalties Thursday night, but none for lowering the helmet

By Josh Alper

Pro Football Talk

September 7, 2018

Penalties for violations of the league's new rules governing the use of the helmet dropped in the last two weeks of the preseason after the NFL clarified that inadvertent contact should not result in a flag.

That trend continued in Thursday night's opener. Officials were not at all shy about calling penalties as there were 26 accepted penalties and two calls that offset, but none of them were for a player lowering his helmet to initiate contact.

It's one game and the 15 to come on Sunday and Monday might bring a different result, but the change made in August may have alleviated some of the concern about how much the game would change because of the rule change.

While the new helmet rule did not come up, a new part of the roughing the passer rule did get called. Falcons defensive tackle Grady Jarrett was flagged for landing his body weight on Nick Foles after Foles delivered a pass in the first half.

President Trump: What was Nike thinking?

By Josh Alper
Sports Techie
September 7, 2018

The Nike ad featuring Colin Kaepernick aired during Thursday night's game between the Falcons and Eagles and it again drew a response from President Trump.

The President took to Twitter on Friday morning to ask "what was Nike thinking?" The company's decision to unveil an ad featuring Kaepernick has been a frequent target for Trump this week.

He also slammed the company during a rally in Montana on Thursday night and squeezed in some time to hammer the NFL. He said in an interview with FOX News that he will win a "culture war" with the league over the national anthem while saying that it is his "understanding" that players are contractually required to stand for the national anthem.

That's not the case. The league had installed a policy requiring players on the field to stand or stay in the locker room with provisions to fine teams if players did not abide. That policy was put on hold pending further discussion between the NFL and NFLPA. In Thursday night's game, Eagles defensive end Michael Bennett sat near the end of the anthem while all other players on both teams stood.