

The Butt Army loves big Jake and cannot lie. After injury, Broncos' tight end is back, baby.

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
September 13, 2018

The Butt Army has invaded Denver. Resistance is futile. You cannot hope to defeat it, Broncos Country. So might as well enlist.

"The Butt Army? We're growing," tight end Jake Butt told me Wednesday. "It's big. And getting bigger."

Pun intended.

Catching his first NFL pass against Seattle, more than 20 months after painfully ripping apart his knee on his final reception in college at Michigan, was a special moment. The Butt Army had returned to active duty. How good did it feel? I sought out the commander in chief to find out.

"Hi, I'm Head Butt," said the father of Denver's tight end, offering me a handshake in the bowels of the stadium.

The Head Butt? Well, I already knew his title, because it was printed on his uniform.

Amid a sea of fans wearing orange and blue during the Broncos' season-opening victory, Rob Butt was easy to spot. He donned his son's No. 80 at the game, cheekily declaring his parental pride with "HEAD BUTT" emblazoned in big, block letters on the back of the customized Broncos jersey.

When the family name is Butt, there's only one way to survive the third grade, much less make it to the NFL. "We taught our kids at an early age to just have fun with it," Rob Butt said.

Standing proudly alongside him Sunday were two of the army's most decorated soldiers. Both wore No. 80. "LIL BUTT" was Zac, younger brother of the tight end. And "MAMA BUTT" was Meg, who gave birth 23 years ago to a child so huge she asked doctors to give Jake genetic tests, wondering if he might actually be a giant.

The Butts cannot lie. They like it big. You know how some households contain enough siblings to form a basketball team? Well, Rob Butt has seven brothers and sisters. Meg Butt is one of 16 children.

"I have cousins I haven't even met," Jake Butt said.

At last count, there were 53 cousins. Basketball team? This is a family big enough to form, well, an army.

On Butt's way to becoming a two-time All-American at Michigan, the army became a part and happy thing. Anyone who loved Butt showed up to games wearing his jersey, adorned with word play on football's funniest, punniest name.

But can we be serious for one minute? While Butt couldn't get on the field as a Broncos rookie in 2017 during rehabilitation from a severe injury, there was an army of supporters walking alongside him on the long road to recovery.

"During my comeback, how much has my family, my teammates, my coaches and my supporting cast meant to me? Everything," Jake Butt said.

He caught two passes against the Seahawks, and rumbled 22 yards into the red zone on Denver's winning touchdown drive.

"It was just good to see him out there on the field," Rob Butt said, "running and enjoying himself again."

When the Broncos travel later this season to play the Bengals, not far from the family's home base in Ohio, at least 100 members of the army will mobilize for a friendly takeover of the stadium in Cincinnati.

The Butt Army has launched an ambitious plan to conquer the NFL world, one city at a time. Might as well start here. It's Raiders Week in Colorado. Jake Butt is looking for new recruits to kick the Raiders' booty. He will get creative to lure volunteers.

For example: There are undoubtedly long-time Oakland fans feeling a sense of deep betrayal, reeling from the trade of linebacker Khalil Mack and angry because their local team is itching to leave the Bay Area for Las Vegas. The Butt Army has an idea. Trade in that silver and black No. 52 of Mack for a brand new orange No. 80 jersey

"There are probably some 5-year-old kids who are Raiders fans that I can win over, after they see me and say: 'Oh, man. His name is Butt! Really? I like him. That's the jersey I want,'" said Jake Butt, reaching out to jilted Oakland supporters looking for a better team to love.

The Butt Army wants you.

Broncos Four Downs: Jon Gruden, Case Keenum have a history

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 13, 2018

FIRST DOWN: Gruden, Keenum have history

Before the 2012 NFL Draft, Case Keenum traveled to Florida for an episode of ESPN's "Gruden QB Camp," with analyst Jon Gruden.

When they meet Sunday, Gruden will be in the second game of his second stint as Oakland's coach and Keenum will be making his second start for the Broncos.

Keenum was not drafted, starting a journey that included stops with the Texans, Rams and Vikings before signing with the Broncos in March.

Gruden said on Wednesday he is "not at all," surprised by Keenum's success.

"I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really like Keenum," Gruden said. "What he did in college (statistically at Houston) was unseen, the type of production he had. ... He's given (the Broncos) consistent, quality play at a position they haven't had since (Peyton) Manning left."

SECOND DOWN: Foul smell to opener

The Raiders finished their 33-13 loss to the Los Angeles Rams late Monday night and face a short week before traveling to Denver.

"And a skunk got loose in our locker room," Gruden said. "That's no kidding. It's been a really tough, short week. We had (a) short week, no sleep and a wild skunk running around in our building."

Asked if he saw the skunk, Gruden said: "You don't have to see it, do you? It's a smell I still can't get out of my face. It's a challenge, man, overcoming all these issues. But you know what? This is what we need. This is what the Raiders need. We need to prove our mental toughness. It's not how you want to feel. You would like to feel fresh as a daisy playing at home coming off a win like Denver is."

THIRD DOWN: Getting away with one

The Broncos were even in turnover ratio against Seattle (three takeaways and giveaways apiece). Winning with an even ratio isn't uncommon, but winning despite giving it away three times is rare.

Last year in the NFL, teams who committed at least three turnovers in a game were 11-78 (12.3 winning percentage). The Broncos were 0-5, losing to the Giants, Chargers, Kansas City, Miami, Washington and Kansas City.

"You can't give a football team three turnovers," coach Vance Joseph said. "But that being said, I told our team (Monday) that stat is a team stat. That can't be a Case (Keenum) stat."

Keenum threw three interceptions, which Seattle turned into 14 of its 24 points.

Oakland was minus-3 in turnover ratio (three giveaways) in Monday's loss to the Rams.

FOURTH DOWN: A sage veteran at 25

Tight end Jeff Heurman played in his 27th NFL game last week, which made him a gray-beard compared to the Broncos' other two tight ends. Jake Butt was making his regular-season debut and Matt LaCosse his eighth appearance.

Heurman said some of the younger Broncos offensive players needed to be picked up after Keenum's interceptions.

"I had to give them a pep talk that (Seattle's) guys are getting paid, too, and some are Pro Bowl players," Heurman said.

Does this make Heurman a sage veteran?

"I know, isn't that crazy?" he said with a laugh. "Fortunately, I had some great tight ends here before me and they showed me a lot of the ins and outs of the NFL."

Broncos Briefs: Improved tackling must carry over to match-up against Marshawn Lynch

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
September 13, 2018

Seven missed tackles before halftime and none after.

The Broncos didn't suddenly remember how to tackle in their season-opening win over Seattle. Likely, brain and body needed to be retrained after not playing for two weeks and not playing a full game since last year.

"Whatever you can call it — jitters, the excitement of the first game, wanting to make a big hit," safety Justin Simmons said after practice Wednesday. "All that stuff combined definitely adds up. But that's getting fixed in practice. You just have to be mentally aware of it."

Simmons correctly pointed out he missed two tackles. He was one of three missed tackles (linebacker Bradley Chubb and safety Darian Stewart) on Seattle tight end Will Dissly's 66-yard catch.

In the second half, the Broncos played with better fundamentals.

"Absolutely, we got better as the game went on," inside linebacker Todd Davis said. "We do drills every day and it's something that's very important. We'll keep getting better at it."

The Broncos' tackling plan needs to be good Sunday against Oakland because running back Marshawn Lynch still has the ability to carry defenders up the field.

"That's how he's been running his whole career: Downhill, always lowering his shoulders, keeping his feet moving on contact," nose tackle Domata Peko said. "I've played him a couple times before and a key is swarming him. You can't have one guy try and tackle him. Eleven hats on the football and knock that pile back."

Henderson returns. Practice squad receiver Carlos Henderson went through his first practice after serving a suspension last week for violating the league's policy on illegal substances.

"It felt good to be out there," Henderson said. "I have to get my wind back and get back in shape, but most of all, I want to help the team get better."

Coach Vance Joseph said last week Henderson's main goal should center on becoming a better pro.

"I agree with him," said Henderson, a 2017 third-round draft pick. "That's what I'm doing, becoming a better pro off the field and handling my business and doing all of the right things."

Welcome back. Safety Shamarko Thomas, released after the preseason but re-signed Tuesday, spent last week visiting his family on the East Coast.

“We had a good conversation with the coaches (on cut-down day) so I had a little bit of an idea,” Thomas said of re-joining the Broncos.

Thomas, who is one of five safeties on the active roster, said the Broncos’ “playbook is still in my head,” from the preseason.

“It’s just the altitude,” he said with a laugh. “It’s crazy because it took me a couple of days when I signed (in August) and then I leave for a week and I have to start over. But I’ll be good in two days.”

All players healthy. All 53 Broncos participated in Wednesday’s non-padded practice.

“Our team is in great condition,” Joseph said. “It was a warm day (Sunday) and guys played fast while they were tired. Obviously, some of it is luck (but) how we practice hopefully helps that.”

Footnotes. Sunday’s referee will be John Hussey, whose crew last week called a combined 26 penalties for 236 yards in Philadelphia’s opening-night win over Atlanta. It was the only game in which both teams had at least 100 yards in penalties. The Raiders, meanwhile, had 11 penalties for a league-high 155 yards in Monday’s loss to the Los Angeles Rams. ... The Broncos signed receiver Isaiah McKenzie to fill out their practice squad. McKenzie has cleared waivers twice in the last week. ... Defensive lineman Kyle Peko, released from the practice squad Monday, signed with Buffalo’s practice team.

Broncos Week 2 opponent: Raiders Scouting Report

By Ryan O'Halloran
The Denver Post
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Coach: Jon Gruden (fifth year with Raiders — 38-27 regular season, 2-2 postseason; 12th year overall — 95-82 regular season, 5-4 postseason).

Record: 0-1.

Last week: Lost 33-13 to the Los Angeles Rams.

Next week: at Miami.

OFFENSE

Play caller: Coach Jon Gruden.

Analysis: Gruden, 55, is back in coaching after spending the last decade in the ESPN booth. He returned to the Raiders in January for a reported 10-year, \$100 million contract. Gruden called the plays during his first stint in Oakland (1998-2001) and his time in Tampa Bay (2002-08). He is a West Coast Offense disciple, working under Mike Holmgren in Green Bay. ... Greg Olson is the offensive coordinator. He coached for Gruden in Tampa Bay. ... In Monday's loss to the Rams, Oakland gained 395 yards, but QB Derek Carr had three interceptions that led to 13 Rams points. ... Running backs and tight ends accounted for 24 of Carr's 29 completions. ... Gruden used six different personnel groupings, led by 3WR-1RB-1TE (46 out of 74 snaps), but also 19 snaps with at least two tight ends on the field. ... The only receivers to play were Amari Cooper (69 snaps), Jordy Nelson (72) and Seth Roberts (47). ... Carr posted only the second three-INT game of his career (the other was in 2015 against Kansas City). Carr took a low hit from Rams DT Aaron Donald (who was penalized) in the first half and looked uncertain in the pocket, throwing it away one time although pressure wasn't present and then a fundamentally poor interception that appeared to be a throwaway attempt. Carr is 3-4 all-time against the Broncos (1-2 at Mile High) with nine TDs and four INTs. ... The Raiders will use three RBs: Veterans Marshawn Lynch and Doug Martin and 24-year old Jalen Richard. ... Lynch is an all-time bruiser, able and willing to carry the pile for more yards. Lynch's last 1,000-yard season was 2014 in Seattle. ... Martin had two 1,400-yard years with Tampa Bay (2012 and '15), but was allowed to leave in free agency. ... Because Lynch was ill and the Raiders fell behind, Richard led the backs in playing time (37 snaps) and caught a career-high nine passes. ... FB Keith Smith played seven snaps on Monday. ... Carr's best weapon was TE Jared Cook, who tied a career-best nine catches and his 180 yards were his most in a game. He will line up at the traditional TE spot, but also in the slot and by himself on one side opposite three WRs. He was so effective against the Rams that CB Aqib Talib was occasionally assigned to him in the second half. ... Derek Carrier and Lee Smith are the other tight ends. ... Look for the Raiders to prioritize Cooper and Nelson against the Broncos. Cooper had one catch for nine yards and Nelson three catches for 23 yards. ... The fourth overall pick in 2015, Cooper started with two 1,000-yard seasons but slipped to 680 last year. ... Nelson, who spent his first nine years in Green Bay and had four 1,200-yard seasons, signed with Oakland after the Packers cut him. ... The Raiders have spent money and draft picks on their offensive line. RG Gabe Jackson and LG Kelechi Osemele each have a \$10.5 million salary cap number (tied for second on the team). RT Donald Penn is at \$5.275 million. C Rodney Hudson and rookie first-round LT Kolton Miller close out the starting five. ... Miller held his own in his NFL

debut. Jackson was beat by Donald's swim move for a sack. ... The Rams rushed four on 39 of Carr's 46 drop-backs.

DEFENSE

Play caller: Coordinator Paul Guenther.

Analysis: Guenther, 46, joined the Raiders after 13 years with Cincinnati. He was the Bengals' coordinator from 2014-17 and Broncos coach Vance Joseph led the defensive backs for the first two years. ... The Raiders run a 4-3 scheme. ... Oakland allowed 5.4 yards per carry to the Rams, including 108 yards on 20 carries by RB Todd Gurley. ... The Raiders rushed five or more players at Rams QB Jared Goff only six times in 37 drop-offs and had one sack (DE Bruce Irvin) and one other hit (DE Arden Key). ... The starting DL on Monday: Justin Ellis and second-round pick PJ Hall inside and Irvin and Frostee Rucker outside. The rest of the rotation is Key (third-round pick) and Fadol Brown at end and fifth-round rookie Maurice Hurst inside. ... The Raiders try to mix up their third-down pressure looks, aligning Irvin inside of the defensive end. ... Irvin is their best pass rusher now that Khalil Mack is in Chicago. ... At linebacker, OLB Tahir Whitehead played all 63 snaps on Monday and made a team-high seven tackles. Derrick Johnson, the former Chief, played 39 snaps and Marquel Lee 24 snaps. ... The Raiders overhauled their secondary in the offseason after finishing 28th in passing yards (241.1) and last in interceptions (five) in 2017. ... New at CB are Rashaan Melvin, Leon Hall and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie. New at safety is Marcus Gilchrist. ... FS Reggie Nelson played all 63 snaps against the Rams and Gilchrist played 59. ... Hall and former first-round CB Gareon Conley led the corners in playing time, followed by Melvin. ... Signed late in camp, Rodgers-Cromartie played 20 snaps and his work included a 51-yard pass interference call. ... Former first-round S Karl Joseph couldn't get on the field (seven plays).

SPECIAL TEAMS

Coordinator: Rich Bisaccia.

Analysis: Bisaccia, 58, was Gruden's special teams coordinator in Tampa Bay from 2002-08 and was kept on for two more years. He has also led the special teams in San Diego (2011-12) and Dallas (2013-17). ... The Raiders changed kickers in early August, releasing Giorgio Tavecchio (16 of 21 on FG last year) and signed veteran Mike Nugent, a 14-year veteran who wade field goals of 24 and 48 yards in Week 1. ... Only one of Nugent's four kickoffs were touchbacks. ... Fifth-round rookie P Johnny Townsend averaged 41.5 yards net on four kicks in his NFL debut. ... LS Andrew DePaola injured knee against the Rams. TE Lee Smith replaced him as the snapper. ... Former Giants and Cowboys special teams ace Dwayne Harris returned punts and kicks in Week 1.

Broncos tracker: Wide receiver Carlos Henderson explains goals in Denver return

By Ryan O'Halloran and Kyle Fredrickson

The Denver Post

September 13, 2018

5:13 p.m. — Carlos Henderson returns

Receiver Carlos Henderson went through his first practice since minicamp. He did not report for any portion of training camp or the preseason and was suspended last week for violating the league's policy on illegal substances. Henderson is on the Broncos' practice squad.

"It felt good to be out there," Henderson said. "I have to get my wind back and get back in shape, but most of all, I want to help the team get better."

Joseph said last week Henderson's main goal is becoming a better pro.

"I agree with him," said Henderson, a 2017 third-round draft pick. "That's what I'm doing, becoming a better pro off the field and handling my business and doing all of the right things."

— Ryan O'Halloran

2:36 p.m. — Raiders' coach Jon Gruden: "I really like (Case) Keenum

Coach Jon Gruden hosted Case Keenum years ago as a part of ESPN's "Gruden QB Camp," series.

On Sunday, it's Gruden's Raiders against Keenum's Broncos.

Asked if he was surprised with Keenum's success, Gruden said: "Not at all."

Gruden added: "I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really like Keenum. What he did in college (statistically at Houston) was unseen, the type of production he had. I told our people a long time ago when I first came here (in January) that the best free agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be Case Keenum.

"What he did in Minnesota, the toughness he puts on tape – he made a throw last week against Seattle, there were 2-3 Seahawks beating down on him and it's a 14-yard gain. His pocket presence, I think his personality, his fight, his grit – he gets the most out of himself and I bet all those players have a ton of respect for him. He's given them consistent, quality play at a position they haven't had since (Peyton) Manning left."

Keenum also recalled his time on Gruden's QB camp with reporters.

— Ryan O'Halloran

1:05 p.m. — Oakland QB Derek Carr on the Broncos' pass rush

Derek Carr understands the danger of Denver's pass rush better than most NFL quarterbacks.

Oakland's gunslinger has faced the Broncos seven times since 2014 and fell victim to a Broncos sack on 16 different occasions. An average that suggests Carr will hit the grass at least two times Sunday at Mile High. But why stop there? The Broncos collected six sacks against Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson in the regular-season opener. Carr watched the film.

"(Denver's pass rush) is very good," Carr said Wednesday on an NFL conference call. "You can tell why (Bradley Chubb) was top-five pick and obviously I've known Von (Miller) a long time now. ... Bradley is a heckuva player. I'm excited to play against him for years to come. ... It's just like everybody on that defense. Since I got in the league, that defense has always been stout and they've been able to maintain it."

Oakland allowed just one sack in its opening-game loss Monday night against the Rams.

— Kyle Fredrickson

Raiders lead NFL with players 30 years or older, but Broncos not far behind

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
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Build the perfect NFL roster. What is your players' average age? The right answer isn't so simple.

The 2013 Seahawks checked in at 26.4, the second-youngest team to ever reach the Super Bowl, and they hoisted the Lombardi Trophy. But that doesn't mean the old guys can't hang. The 2002 Raiders (30.7), 1998 Broncos (30.1) and 1972 Redskins (29.8), all got to the NFL's championship game leaning on experience.

Which brings us to Sunday afternoon at Mile High.

First-year Raiders coach Jon Gruden is taking his old-school football approach a bit literally, considering the makeup of his team. There are an NFL-high 16 players age 30 or older on Oakland's roster, and essential pieces, too, like running back Marshawn Lynch (32), tight end Jared Cook (32), cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie (32), wide receiver Jordy Nelson (33) and defensive tackle Frostee Rucker (35).

While some opposing squads might scoff at Gruden's approach to filling immediate needs, an influx of veterans is seen as a critical juncture for a total culture rebuild by Oakland players and coaches. The Raiders last won a playoff game in 2002, proof the locker room might be in need of some age-old wisdom.

"That's helped our young players a lot, having veterans in every room is important on both sides of the ball," Oakland quarterback Derek Carr said. "For the young guys to see the older vets and guys who have made Pro Bowls and made plays in this league, how they work and what it takes to compete every Sunday and really the effort you have to do in taking care of your body. All those things are things that are important to an organization. It's been good."

The Broncos' average age right after 53-man cut day checked in at 26 year old, which ranked No. 17 league-wide, according to the Philly Voice. Oakland topped the list at 27.4. Denver has a significant share of veterans, though, with eight Broncos older than 30 — cornerback Adam Jones (34), defensive tackle Domata Peko Sr. (33), right tackle Jared Veldheer (31), wide receiver Emmanuel Sanders (31), wide receiver Demaryius Thomas (30), safety Darian Stewart (30), cornerback Tramaine Brock (30) and quarterback Case Keenum (30).

Where Denver finds balance are roster spots filled with promising young talent such as running backs Royce Freeman (22) and Phillip Lindsay (24), receiver Courtland Sutton (22) and edge rusher Bradley Chubb (22). All that matters to coach Vance Joseph? Which Broncos can be trusted on game day — age be damned.

"Even though they're young players, they're good football players," Joseph said. "They've earned their way to play, so it's not about holding their hand or making it easy for those guys."

Keenum added: "We have experience, we have young guys and we have all sorts of talent on all sides of the ball."

The downside to relying on players born in the 1980s is the increase for potential injuries. No need to remind 55-year-old Gruden. A plan is already in place to best keep his veterans fresh when the schedule rolls to December.

"Sometimes you battle the cap, but we brought in some veteran guys that have come in and contributed," Gruden said. "We will monitor everything they eat, we'll put sleep bracelets on them, we'll take care of them with all of the technology that mankind has provided."

Before Broncos Country cracks too many jokes about the Raiders' age, they should also consider recent history. Denver's last championship rested on the 39-year-old shoulders of Peyton Manning — the oldest quarterback in history to win a Super Bowl.

Garett Bolles, Denver Broncos offensive line pass first test against Seattle

By Kyle Fredrickson
The Denver Post
September 13, 2018

The Broncos aimed to use training camp and preseason games to prepare for every possible scenario. Some facts of NFL play simply can't be simulated. Case in point: The first complete game with Denver's retooled offensive line.

The combination of left tackle Garett Bolles, left guard Ron Leary, center Matt Paradis, right guard Connor McGovern and right tackle Jared Veldheer attempted to build chemistry as Denver's starting unit throughout its offseason program and exhibition play. Teammates and coaches raved about improvement but until the regular season started, no one was sure how the unit would play.

Sunday's 27-24 season opening victory over Seattle provided a baseline.

"It's the first time you're actually playing a full game out there," Veldheer said. "You get a lot more ebb-and-flow. There are some lulls you have to fight through."

All five starters played all 74 snaps in the victory and committed zero penalties. That was an encouraging sign for Denver's contrasting offensive tackles, each with something to prove. Bolles is a 2017 first-round draft pick whom the Broncos need to improve in Year 2, and Veldheer, a ninth-year pro making a return from ankle surgery, is in first season with the team.

Coach Vance Joseph said Veldheer "played really well" Sunday and Bolles "did some good things. He had a couple mental things he's got to clean up." The overall impression, though, was a good one.

"As far the tackles, we played really well," Joseph said. "We had one sack, and the one sack was on quick-game — the ball should've probably (been thrown) in the flat. ... If we're going to win games, keep (quarterback) Case (Keenum) clean and help Case play better and better each week; we've got to run the football and protect Case. So far, so good with those guys playing so well for us."

Veldheer added: "Obviously, there's a lot of stuff that we want to keep cleaning up. But doing enough things to get some good yardage out there is good."

Bolles balanced learning with success last season. He landed on the Pro Football Writers Association's All-Rookie team but also led the Broncos with 15 penalties (10 holding, four false starts and one unnecessary roughness). Bolles told reporters he's done addressing his play in 2017. Instead, he'll describe the time he now spends after practice with Veldheer to refine small details that led to costly mistakes as a rookie.

"Understanding that if you want to be the best, you've got to practice the best and do things the best way. I feel like we do a great job with that," Bolles said. "It starts with (offensive line/guards coach Sean) Kugler and (offensive line/tackles coach Chris) Strausser and their preparation. It's a special thing. I'm excited to see where this goes, because we're right on track and we're heading in a good direction."

The Broncos are also taking a new approach in best coaching to Bolles' elite size (6-foot-5, 297 pounds) and unusual skill set. The results showed improvement in Week 1. Bolles did not allow a quarterback pressure in pass protection, per the Denver Post's game charting, while Veldheer allowed one. Seattle's one sack was the result of inside pressure.

"(Bolles) is a long, athletic tackle. We're coaching him to set quicker and not give as much ground — to use his quickness on guys," Joseph said. "If you're facing a great rusher and you give him space, he can bully you or he can run around you. We're getting Garrett on guys quicker so he can use his feet and his great quickness to stand in front of guys quicker. It's preventing him from being so soft in the pocket like he was last year."

Next up is an Oakland team on short rest from a 33-13 defeat Monday night to the Rams. In Jon Gruden's coaching return, the Raiders sacked quarterback Jared Goff once and gave up 108 yards on the ground to running back Todd Gurley. Denver's blend of veteran offensive line leadership between Veldheer, Paradis and Leary paired with budding talents in McGovern and Bolles bodes well for the future.

Most importantly, there is no confusion about roles.

Bronco notes: Carr, Keenum say Bill Musgrave smarter than them all

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 13, 2018

I'm going to have to start paying closer attention to Bill Musgrave's weekly press conferences.

I knew Musgrave has been a real good offensive coordinator for a long time. I did not realize he was the Einstein of NFL offense.

Then came a conference call Wednesday with one of Musgrave's former star pupils, Oakland quarterback Derek Carr, in advance of the game Sunday between the Broncos and Raiders.

"He's one of the smartest people I've ever been around when it comes to analytics numbers and percentages and things like that," Carr said of Musgrave. "He's one of the smartest people that I've ever been around."

When Musgrave was Oakland's offensive coordinator in 2015-16, Carr accumulated 7,924 passing yards, 60 touchdown passes, 19 interceptions and a 93.9 passer rating.

In his three seasons without Musgrave, Carr has 7,069 yards, 43 touchdown passes, 28 interceptions and an 80.2 rating.

Later Wednesday, up stepped Musgrave's current star pupil, Broncos quarterback Case Keenum, who was asked to describe his offensive coordinator's attributes.

"Bill is as smart as they come," Keenum said. "He's brilliant and I really appreciate his knowledge of the game and how he explains, installs and teaches us the game."

"He does a great job of teaching us the game and he sees it through a quarterback's eyes, which I really like, having a coordinator who played at quarterback and knows what we're going through."

Musgrave is a former Gold Helmet winning quarterback from Grand Junction High School who was a four-year starter at Oregon and a six-year backup in the NFL, including two seasons behind Denver's John Elway.

Musgrave is in his 20th season as an NFL quarterbacks coach or offensive coordinator. In his first, full-time game as the Broncos' offensive coordinator, Denver amassed 27 points and 470 yards in total offense with Keenum throwing for 329 in the season opening win against Seattle last week.

Musgrave's can't miss press conference is Thursday.

King of few words

Marquette King became a rare star punter during his first five seasons with the Raiders, but he was released soon after Jon Gruden was hired as their latest head coach.

King is now punting for the Broncos and will get a chance to show his stuff Sunday against Gruden.

“Who’s that?” King said. “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

Is King looking forward to the game against his former Raiders?

“I’m looking forward to every game,” he said.

King is a pleasant, soft-spoken, even shy type.

You’re not going to give me anything, are you Marquette?

He smiled and shook his head, no.

Am I wasting my time?

King again smiled and shook his head, this time, yes. Fair enough.

State of the Raid-uhs

With the Raiders playing through two lame-duck seasons in Oakland before moving their franchise to Las Vegas in 2020, the trade of their best player Khalil Mack to Chicago two weeks ago in exchange for essentially first-round draft picks in 2019 and 2020 created the impression the Raiders merely want to “Just Win for Vegas, baby!”

“I try not to worry about the perception,” Gruden said in his conference call with the Denver media. “I was in the media for a long time trying to talk about perceptions. The reality is we’re building our team. We’ve had 10 head coaches since I was traded here (in 2002). That’s unbelievable. We’ve had no continuity. None. And we’re building our team and we’re trying to win at the same time.

“But we’re going to try to build the Oakland Raiders into a great championship football team. It might not happen this week, it might not happen this month, but we have a great attitude, we have some great veteran leadership, we like our draft picks and we’re making progress.”

Raiders coach Jon Gruden and Broncos Keenum go back to QB's pro beginning

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 13, 2018

Let the record show Oakland Raiders head coach Jon Gruden liked Case Keenum before the Broncos did.

The two go back a ways, as Keenum had just capped his NCAA record-setting passing career at the University of Houston and Gruden was a popular NFL broadcaster who held a skull-session QB camp for incoming rookies.

Usually Gruden would limit his QB camp to the top-rated prospects but he saw something special in Keenum, who nevertheless went undrafted in 2012.

Keenum bounced around from team to team, from practice squad to third string to backup before finally breaking out with the Minnesota Vikings last year.

And then the Broncos showed their love by signing Keenum to a two-year, \$36 million contract and giving him the responsibility of becoming their franchise quarterback.

Surprised he made it this far, coach?

"No, I'm not surprised at all," Gruden said Wednesday during a conference call with the Denver media. "I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really like Keenum. What he did in college is unseen, the type of production he had.

"I told our people a long time ago when I first came here I think the free-agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be Case Keenum. What he did in Minnesota, the toughness he puts on tape – he made a throw last week against Seattle -- there's two or three Seahawks beating down on him and it's a 14-yard gain.

"His pocket presence, I think his personality, his fight, his grit – he gets the most out of himself. I bet if you ask all those players they have a ton of respect for him. He's given them consistent, quality play at the position that they haven't had since Manning left."

Peyton Manning retired three years ago. Keenum recalls Gruden taking his QB session with the seriousness of the coach he once was rather than the unique media personality he had become.

"He is literally a grinder, said Keenum, who still holds the NCAA career passing records of 19,217 yards and 155 touchdowns.

"It was back in his studio. His office, it looks like a TV set with all the film behind him, but that's actual film that he stays in there and watches.

“I’m pretty sure he had watched every rep I had ever played in college. He found some obscure tape, I don’t know where he got it from. It was a lot of fun. I got a lot of good feedback and enjoyed it.”

Come Sunday afternoon, when Keenum’s Broncos play Gruden’s Raiders at Broncos Stadium at Mile High, Denver hopes the former QB camper shows his former QB consultant in person just how much he’s learned.

Brittany Bowlen begins next step towards becoming Broncos owner

By Mike Klis

9 News

September 13, 2018

The journey towards succeeding her father as the Broncos' principal owner continues for Brittany Bowlen.

The clear favorite among Pat Bowlen's seven children to one day take charge of the Broncos, Brittany Bowlen begins her new job with McKinsey & Company on Wednesday at the firm's downtown Denver branch.

McKinsey is considered one of the world's most prestigious business consulting companies. Business experience is considered a vital step for Brittany Bowlen to become qualified for consideration as the Broncos' boss, as measured by the trustees of the Pat Bowlen Trust.

There is little question Brittany met whatever education requirements have been set forth as she graduated from Notre Dame with a finance degree and 3.8 grade-point average in 2013 and earned her Master's and Business Administration (MBA) degree from Duke University in May.

She has also interned for NBC Sports, worked two full years in a variety of roles at the NFL office in New York, and the 2015 season with the Broncos as a business analyst.

While there is no timetable for how long Brittany Bowlen will work for McKinsey, the expectation is when she completes her term there she will be brought back to the Broncos for more team front-office experience.

Pat Bowlen, who has been nominated as a finalist for the Pro Football Hall of Fame, was the chief steward of the Broncos from March 1984 until Alzheimer's disease led to transferring control of the team to the Pat Bowlen Trust in July 2014.

The trust is run by three trustees: Joe Ellis, who also serves as the Broncos' chief executive officer and president, Rich Slivka, the Broncos' general counsel, and attorney Mary Kelly. It would make sense for the trust to continue overseeing the team through the new collective bargaining agreement negotiations in 2021 while Brittany Bowlen continues to build her resume.

While the trust oversees the entire Broncos' franchise operation, John Elway has been running the team's football operations since 2011. Elway is in the second year of a five-year contract extension he received last year.

Broncos' John Elway meets Raiders' Jon Gruden again, 20 years later

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN

September 13, 2018

It has been 20 years since a 35-year-old Jon Gruden stood on the sideline inside Mile High Stadium during his first trip to Denver as head coach of the Oakland Raiders.

The Denver Broncos' starting quarterback that day, John Elway, was in his final season as a player, one that culminated in a second Super Bowl win. Since then, Elway has been enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame, managed a business empire, returned to football as the Broncos chief football decision-maker - - winning another Super Bowl to close out 2015 -- and has become a grandfather.

Gruden, now in the first season of his second stint as Raiders coach, returns to Denver on Sunday as a 55-year-old who many of league's fans were introduced to as an ESPN analyst on Monday Night Football or challenging draft hopefuls during his QB Camp series.

Elway and Gruden: two guys who didn't have to return to pro football, who had enough money and fame not to, and yet here they are back in the game because they each say they needed to be.

"I don't feel like I ever left football. ... I just didn't have a team," Gruden said. "I wanted to come back because I love the Raiders, I love football, I wanted to help build a championship team."

The Broncos won that first meeting between Elway and Gruden in 1998, 34-17.

"Yeah, it wasn't very fun, it was a nightmare," Gruden said Monday about that game. "They were a great team right ... [at] the height of their run."

The Raiders held a 10-7 lead at one point, but the Broncos were building toward a 13-0 start and a 14-2 finish. They were the best team in the league and the Raiders went on to an 8-8 finish.

"I do remember looking at them as a model of what we wanted to become," Gruden said. "And we took it upon ourselves every day to beat Denver. I think I only beat them once when I was here as the head coach -- on Monday Night Football -- but it was the greatest win of my career as a Raiders coach because I know how far we came in just a few years."

And now it is a desire to compete, a desire to work until each decides when to call it a career, that has lured both Elway and Gruden back to the game.

As Elway put it: "You want to compete. ... I was done playing, after that ['98] season, when I thought about it all after the season was over I felt like that was the right time for me [to retire], physically, mentally. But saying that, that desire to compete doesn't really leave you."

This offseason, Elway said Gruden "was a great coach in this league for a long time" and "that I'm sure it will add to the rivalry we have with the Raiders."

The Broncos current quarterback, 30-year-old Case Keenum, has a history with Gruden as well. Following a college career at the University of Houston he was featured on Gruden's QB Camp leading up to the 2013 draft.

"I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really liked Keenum," Gruden said. "What he did in college is unseen, the type of production he had. ... I told our people a long time ago, when I first came here, I think the free-agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be Case Keenum. ... His fight, his grit, he gets the most out of himself."

Said Keenum of Gruden: "It was really fun, he really is a grinder. ... Pretty sure he had watched every rep I had ever played in college, found some obscure tape, it was a lot of fun ... enjoyed it."

Keenum was Elway's pick in free agency to lead the Broncos out of last season's 5-11 funk, the first losing season the team has had in Elway's tenure as a personnel executive. And Keenum threw for 329 yards and three touchdowns, to go with three interceptions, in last Sunday's win over the Seahawks.

Gruden's debut, a 33-13 loss to the Los Angeles Rams on Monday night, was a far rockier affair, especially in the wake of the Raiders' trade of a former NFL Defensive Player of the Year in Khalil Mack just before the start of the regular season.

Gruden was asked Monday if his football persona was any different than the one many had seen on television in recent seasons and he reaffirmed why he came back to coaching and the work ahead.

"I don't think it's very much different," Gruden said. "I just like football. I just love, I love the challenges of being back on the field, I love being on a team. Biggest change is I have a scoreboard. And right now the scoreboard is telling me I'm not doing very good."

Poll: Nike Kaepernick ad alienated some but hit target

By Darren Rovell

ESPN

September 13, 2018

The overall perception of the Nike brand fell significantly following the release of Colin Kaepernick's "Just Do It" ad unveiled on Labor Day.

While virtually no one among the general public thought of Nike negatively in a Harris Poll taken in December 2017, 17 percent of respondents in a poll taken last week by the organization said they saw Nike in a negative light.

The percentage of people who said they couldn't imagine living without Nike dropped nine percent, from 33 percent to 24 percent.

The results of the poll, taken of 2,026 Americans representative of the U.S. population, were exclusively shared with ESPN on Wednesday.

But not all was lost.

The poll revealed that while 21 percent of the general public said they would stop buying Nike, 19 percent said they would buy even more Nike products, and, of the young males in their target market, 29 percent said they would purchase more products.

"Nike took a strategic risk to alienate some customers in order to appeal to their core base of 18- to 29-year old males," said John Gerzema, CEO of the Harris Poll. "It was a calculated move to become a more polarizing brand, and it seems to have worked."

The ad boosted how positively the 18- to 29-year-old age group thought of Nike by six percentage points from when the poll was taken nine months before. Gerzema said it helped Nike catch up, in the positive perception category, to Under Armour (57 percent) and Adidas (61 percent).

Nike has not commented since the debut of the ad, which was supported by billboards in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The ad voiced by Kaepernick aired on the NFL regular-season debut on NBC last Thursday.

Data tracking firm Edison Trends last week said that its work had shown that online sales of Nike product was up 31 percent over Labor Day weekend compared to the average sale days a month before. Labor Day sales were only up 17 percent versus the average in 2017.

Since the younger audience is more likely to shop online, the polling data matches the sales data.

"Gen Z [13 to 22 years old] and millennials [22 to 34 years old] value companies that are socially active," Gerzema said. "The younger population approve of Nike's choice to use Colin Kaepernick."

Of those that said that they wouldn't wear Nike again, 5 percent said they tore the Nike swooshes off their clothing, 7 percent said they got rid of their Nike items and 12 percent said they were telling their friends to take similar action.

Nike came out favorably in its response to the controversy surrounding NFL players' use of the national anthem to take a stand on other issues.

The Harris Poll revealed that only 25 percent thought of the NFL's response as positive, 26 percent found the media should be portrayed in a good look regarding its coverage, 30 percent felt good about how President Donald Trump handled things and 42 percent favored Nike's handling of the situation.

Despite three costly turnovers, Case Keenum showed Broncos what they've been missing

By Nicki Jhabvala

The Athletic

September 13, 2018

Case Keenum notched his first victory as the Broncos' starting quarterback and gave fans plenty of reasons to believe this year could be different in Denver. But the day-after excitement that Keenum could only imagine for months didn't feel like he hoped it would.

"I woke up this morning and I would say it didn't feel quite like I wanted it to feel after my first win as a Bronco," he said Monday evening. "So there's a lot of hunger. We're all very, very hungry to get out there and keep getting better this week."

Keenum left the Broncos' stadium on Sunday wanting a do-over for three plays against the Seahawks. One came in the first quarter, when Earl Thomas picked off a pass intended for Demaryius Thomas. Another came in the second, when Bradley McDougald intercepted a pass for Jake Butt.

And the last one came in the third quarter. One play after Von Miller forced and recovered a fumble, Keenum's deep ball intended for Emmanuel Sanders was picked off, again, by McDougald.

"You can't give a football team three turnovers," coach Vance Joseph said. "In Pete Carroll's day, he's been 24-3 with three-plus turnovers.

"But that being said, I told our team ... that stat is a team stat. That can't be a Case stat. That can't be an offensive stat."

The interceptions were reminders of what felled the Broncos last season, when they amassed 34 turnovers — second-most behind the winless Browns — that led to a league-high 140 points for opponents.

Denver beat itself often, and witnessed others do the same. Eighty-nine times last year a team had three or more turnovers. Seventy-eight of those instances, 88 percent, resulted in losses for the offending team. The Broncos accounted for six of those losses as their impressive start to 2017 crumbled.

On Sunday, however, they still eked out a victory, thanks to a defense that created three of its own takeaways and a resilience from Keenum and the offense that appeared unflappable.

"After watching the film numerous times, after the interceptions, he had his best drives," Joseph said. "That speaks to his confidence. It speaks to him not folding. I was really impressed with Case on the sideline. He didn't go in the tank at all. He kept his teammates going and obviously moved the ball for us after the mistakes."

In March, Denver signed Keenum to a \$36 million contract to provide stability and production, and to clean up their many messes from the previous year. During the 2017 regular season, Keenum proved to

be one of the cleanest passers, with a mere seven interceptions in 481 attempts and a 67.6 completion percentage that ranked second in the NFL.

But in his last three outings, including Minnesota's two playoff games last season, Keenum has thrown six interceptions.

Interestingly, five of them have been in the same personnel groupings — one running back, one tight end, three wide receivers — and all have been against four-man rushes.

But a review of Keenum's three interceptions Sunday show more:

The First

In the first quarter on a first-and-10 at Denver's own 24-yard line, Keenum lined up under center and aimed deep for Thomas, who wasn't even looking as he continued on his route. It appeared as if Keenum expected Thomas to turn back for the ball, but the quarterback said after the game that the fault was his.

"That was just a poor decision on my part," Keenum said. "Very poor. Earl read my eyes and made a play. He makes a big difference, he's a great player. Not taking anything away from him because he is one of the best that does it. That was a poor decision on my part. It was a bad throw."

On the next play, Russell Wilson found tight end Will Dissly for the 15-yard touchdown to give the Seahawks an early 7-0 lead.

The Second

The Broncos were in two-minute football late in the second quarter when, on a second-and-3 at Seattle's 26, Keenum tossed his second interception. After fielding the snap in shotgun, Keenum moved up in the pocket to evade pressure and targeted Butt for a short pass to the left. McDougald stepped in front for the diving catch.

The Broncos had a seven-point lead and were already in field-goal range. The turnover cost them a potential three points and a chance to expand their lead to two scores.

The Third

In shotgun again on first down, Keenum targeted Sanders on a crossing route. But just as Sanders neared the right sideline, McDougald jumped the route for the interception. Seattle scored five plays later to tie the game at 17-all.

"That's 17 points that I'm responsible for," Keenum said. "I know that, I realize that, it's something that I'm going to fix and that I'm going to be better at."

Keenum admitted after the win that he pressed a bit, going for the big plays instead of settling for the safer ones. The balance is often a difficult one to strike, but Keenum's decisions and drives after the turnovers provided the Broncos hope that the mistakes won't spiral into an unfixable trend, like in years past.

“We got some incredible playmakers to make plays down field,” Keenum said. “If anything, I need to make sure that I know when a shot’s called it’s not necessarily a shot taken and to check the ball down and rely on those guys. Because I got some really good playmakers. Let them do what they do. I don’t have to do everything myself.”

The three turnovers masked a fat zero that put the Broncos in a class of its own in Week 1. Denver was the only team to have no three-and-out drives in their first game, a remarkable feat considering it totaled with 47 and 56 three-and-outs over the last two seasons, respectively.

The stalled drives and turnovers led to early deficits, which placed a greater burden on the defense, which allowed opposing offenses to rely more on running backs, which turned Denver’s 3-1 start last year into a 5-11 disaster.

The three turnovers on Sunday were glaring, and put a spotlight on the biggest area of needed improvement. But the positives from Keenum’s play, and that of the offense, were obvious too.

The Broncos finished among the NFL’s top 10 in nearly every offensive category with 470 net yards (fifth), 6.5 yards per play (sixth), 27 points (tied for ninth), 146 net rushing yards (seventh), 324 net passing yards (fourth) and only one sack allowed (tied for fourth).

The numbers are reflections of the team’s depth and added talent, especially from its younger players, and the year-over-year improvement from its offensive line.

“They challenged our rush, which we have inexperience there,” Seattle defensive end Frank Clark said. “I think that’s what they did a good job of doing, in their protections, slowing us down that way.”

The numbers also show marks of resilience.

Last year, general manager John Elway infamously called his team “soft” as it endured an eight-game losing streak and failed to bounce back from its repeated mistakes.

Not the case so far this year.

Denver’s ensuing possession after the first-quarter interception was a 75-yard drive that ended with a 29-yard touchdown pass to Phillip Lindsay. After the Seahawks took a three-point lead in the second quarter, the Broncos responded with a 43-yard touchdown and a 51-yard field goal. And after Seattle took a four-point lead to start the fourth, Keenum led the Broncos on another 75-yard drive that he capped with a go-ahead touchdown pass to Demaryius Thomas.

“Obviously he made three throws he probably wants back, but I think for the first opener, Case was under a lot of pressure,” Elway said in his weekly address with the team’s website. “Coming in here and understanding what the expectations were, he was under a lot of pressure. But one thing that he didn’t do is he didn’t stop (being aggressive). He stayed aggressive and stayed after it and played well in the fourth quarter and really made some plays that were able to get us over the top. Case will learn from this and understand that he’s got a lot of people around him to help him out. But I like his grit and I like what he’s about, so I have high expectations about Case going forward.”

After the win, Sanders said he believes the opener will end up being Keenum's worst outing this year. His first chance to show improvement will come Sunday against a Raiders team that lost its quarterback nemesis, Khalil Mack, and is in the beginning phase of a total rebuild.

But the coach is one who knows Keenum well.

In 2012, after setting a slew of records at the University of Houston, Keenum was on Jon Gruden's "QB Camp" on ESPN. At the time, Gruden admitted: "I'm accused of liking everybody anyway. Hell, I like Keenum too. I love this Keenum."

Wednesday, as his Raiders prepared to face Keenum in a new setting, Gruden's tune didn't change.

"I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really like Keenum," he said via conference call. "What he did in college is unseen in the type of production that he had. I told our people a long time ago when I first came here, I think the free-agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be Case Keenum. What he did in Minnesota, the toughness that he puts on tape — he made a throw last week against Seattle, there's two or three Seahawks beating down on him, it's a 14-yard gain, but his pocket presence, I think his personality, his fight, his grit, he gets the most out of himself. I bet you ask all those players, they have a ton of respect for him. He's given them consistent, quality play at the position that they haven't had since Manning left."

Think you know Adam Jones? Try seeing him through the eyes of an 18-year-old cancer survivor

By Lindsey Jones

The Athletic

September 13, 2018

There's the version of Adam Jones who most football fans think they know. That's Pacman, who was once the poster child for NFL players acting badly. Now 34 years old and in his 12th year in the league after signing with the Broncos late last month, Jones doesn't make excuses for the arrests and incidents that made him one of the league's most notorious players.

But there's also the version of Jones who Lilian Schaffer knows. That's the guy who most NFL fans have probably never seen.

That version of Jones is like a big brother to Lilian, the 18-year-old daughter of Jones' longtime agent, Peter Schaffer, and a guy who initially bonded seven years ago with Lilian over their shared love of horses, and the player who has dedicated his 2018 season to Lilian's cancer fight.

"She's strong, man. I saw every video. After chemo, she would go and ride her horses. She would work out. It's unbelievable," Jones told The Athletic. "You have to have real drive and dedication and heart. I'd tell her, 'Baby, you're a star.' To handle herself in the way that she handled herself. She never thought about anything else but winning."

The relationship between an NFL player and his agent is a unique one – a combination of business partner, advocate, financial adviser, legal counsel and therapist. For Jones and Schaffer, it feels like family.

Jones signed with Schaffer in 2010, five years into Jones' tumultuous NFL career, and after the bulk of Jones' off-field trouble. Jones was suspended for the 2007 season and part of 2008 as punishment for multiple arrests dating back to 2005, when he was a first-round pick out of West Virginia by the Tennessee Titans. The most infamous incident was the 2007 shooting at a Las Vegas strip club that injured two men, including one who was left paralyzed. Jones pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge of conspiracy to commit disorderly conduct. He also lost a civil suit filed by the shooting victims.

"When you go through stuff and you deal with certain things, a lot of it had to do with myself and my choices and my decisions. Some of it had to do with some people just being assholes, but either way that it is, and then you look at being in those dark corners, when you don't have nobody to call. I've been in situations where I've taken care of so many people, all of my family, and just needed a phone call, but didn't have nobody to talk to, you know what I mean?" Jones said. "Thank God it happened to me when I was young. I was able to get over the hurdle and do a couple things to at least get my family in a position to be all right. At the end of the day, when that tunnel is dark, there's not too many people you can call on."

Schaffer became that voice on the other end of the phone. Jones was beginning his career rebirth in Cincinnati when he joined Schaffer's agency, and soon realized just how much he'd depend on his agent.

On Aug. 15, 2010, in the middle of Bengals training camp, Jones' then-girlfriend Tishana went into labor with the couple's daughter at 22 weeks. Triniti weighed just under two pounds, and could fit inside the palm of Jones' hand. She was so tiny that Jones broke down and had to rush out of the room when doctors asked him to cut the umbilical cord.

Baby Triniti stayed in the hospital for five months, during which time Jones returned to football and suffered a serious neck injury that October, before finally being released shortly after the baby's original due date.

Last month, Triniti turned eight. She plays basketball, loves math and got straight A's on her last report card, Jones said.

So it was from one father to another that Jones immediately knew that something was wrong with Schaffer when he made one of his near-daily calls to his agent just after Halloween last year. This call would be different. There would be no BS'ing, no venting, no football.

"Adam, you should sit down," Schaffer said.

Then the bombshell: Lilian had cancer.

After six months of misdiagnosis and non-answers from specialists ranging from allergists to psychiatrists, all trying to find a reason for Lilian's extreme fatigue, inexplicable and uncontrollable full-body itching, insomnia, fevers and night sweats, oncologists at Denver's Children's Hospital finally discovered a football-sized tumor in her chest.

She was immediately admitted to the hospital on Oct. 27 to begin treatment, starting with surgery the next day and her first of 70 chemotherapy sessions within the week.

"You're just in a state of shock," Schaffer said.

The next seven months were a blur of hospital stays and chemo treatments and 14 rounds of radiation. Lilian was able to graduate from high school, but fell short of finishing the requirements for her International Baccalaureate diploma. Through it all, she found strength in riding horses, and from the support of her dad's wide network of NFL colleagues.

Jones and Panthers running back C.J. Anderson, who played for the Broncos from 2013-2017 and was a constant fixture at the Schaffer house, were the first of Schaffer's clients to post tributes to Lilian on their social media accounts. Browns' great Joe Thomas soon followed.

Schaffer sought counsel from Chiefs head athletic trainer Rick Buckholder, who provided insight into safety Eric Berry's Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis and treatment, and former Colts coach and leukemia survivor Chuck Pagano sent Lilian an inspirational video.

On Nov. 5, just a week after Lilian's diagnosis, Jones had a picture of Lilian riding her horse printed onto his cleats, game-day towels and a T-shirt he wore for the Bengals game against the Jacksonville Jaguars. He later shared the link for her fundraising efforts, and in July, the Instagram video he posted of her ringing the "Warrior Bell" at Children's Hospital to celebrate entering remission received more than 40,000 views.

“He kept in touch the whole journey,” Lilian said.

Perhaps it is serendipitous then that Jones wound up here in Denver after signing a one-year free-agent deal with the Broncos in the final week of the preseason. He made the 53-man roster a week later and by Week 1, had established himself as the Broncos No. 3 cornerback and punt returner.

It means those frequent phone calls to Shcaffer and his family have been replaced by evenings spent at the Shaffer home, sitting around the kitchen counter as Schaffer’s 14-year-old son Gavin learns to cook, and talking about horses, music and fashion with Lilian.

Lilian is now taking a gap year before she enrolls in college. She’s focused on cancer awareness and has raised nearly \$15,000 for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society’s Light the Night walk that will be held later this month in Denver, where she’ll be joined at Washington Park by Jones and several of her dad’s other clients, like former Broncos safety Steve Atwater.

And next week, Lilian and Jones will finally get to ride horses together, seven years after it was horses that first brought them together. That Jones’ wife and Triniti plan to join them should make the day even more special.

“I’ve never been through the stuff that Peter and his family have been through, but I’ve been through stuff with my kids that I couldn’t control, and when you need somebody to talk to, in a dark moment, when you need to cuss or do whatever you’ve got to do, he’s been there for me, and vice versa,” Jones said.

Broncos Case Keenum knows shots called doesn't mean shots taken

By Troy Renck

KMGH

September 13, 2018

A seamless debut never seemed realistic.

Case Keenum, since arriving in Denver in March, has looked, acted and filled the part of a franchise quarterback. But it's different when you walk onto the field for the first time in a game that matters -- a game you have never started and won -- and face expectations perhaps never felt since leading a high school team to a state championship.

Keenum is The Man. There's no question. Yet, there is a transition. The Broncos' closer-than-necessary 27-24 victory over Seattle traced to Keenum's three interceptions. He took the wheel and steered a nervy fourth-quarter drive, but he needs to be better in the series leading to the finish.

"We have some incredible playmakers on this team. If anything, I need to know this week that a shot called isn't necessarily a shot taken," explained Keenum on balancing taking care of the ball with taking risks. "I can take the check down if I need to and let my guys make plays."

Keenum's uneven performance raised questions, but also provided hints on why the Broncos coveted him. Offensive coordinator Bill Musgrave never wavered in his trust of Keenum after the interceptions. After his first pick, Keenum completed seven of his next eight passes.

"You know Case did a nice job. Obviously, he made three throws he probably wants back," general manager John Elway said on the team's website. "In his first start, Case was under a lot of pressure. But the one thing he didn't do was stop being aggressive. He stayed after it and played well."

On the final score drive, Keenum stared down pressure on third down and absorbed a roughing the passer penalty, while drilling a 22-yard strike to tight end Jake Butt. Raiders coach Jon Gruden, who once hosted Keenum at his ESPN quarterback camp, noticed. Not that he was surprised.

"I told people in our building that the best free agent acquisition (this offseason) was going to be Case Keenum," Gruden said on a Wednesday conference call. "His personality, his fight, his grit. ... I am sure his teammates see it. Everyone accuses me of liking every quarterback, but I really like him."

Keenum continues to check boxes. He has now started and won an opener. His challenge remains to continue to get better, to put the Broncos in the playoff conversation. Denver enters this week as a 6-point favorite against Oakland, who fell face first in the second half of an opening loss to the Los Angeles Rams. The Raiders produced one sack, with Gruden lamenting the lack of pass rush. It was predictable after the team traded away All-Pro Khalil Mack.

"They ask a lot about it. And rightfully so. He's a great guy, and a great player. It's unfortunate we don't have him," Gruden said. "We feel we did the right thing for this football team and for this building process. I know we have to prove it. But so does he."

Keenum faces a defense that continues searching for its identity sans Mack. Rams quarterback Jared Goff completed 18 of 33 passes for 233 yards, two touchdowns and no interceptions.

And let's not forget the Raiders are working on a short week with travel and, well, that stinks.

"And we had no sleep and a wild skunk in our building. I am not kidding," Gruden said. "It's a smell I still can't get out of my face."

Footnotes

Oakland quarterback Derek Carr played his best football under coordinator Bill Musgrave. He sees similarities to the offense he ran with Musgrave calling plays in Denver. His respect for Musgrave is real. "He's one the smartest people I have ever been around. We have kept in contact. He's a great guy with a great family." ... Carr called Broncos Von Miller a "walking Hall of Famer." Gruden and Carr admitted that Bradley Chubb's ability to play the strongside -- where he has run and some coverage responsibilities -- makes Miller more dangerous on the weakside.

Broncos, Keenum cleaning things up after 3-turnover debut

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
September 13, 2018

Case Keenum's new beginning in Denver was blotted by an uncharacteristic three interceptions, almost half the number he threw in Minnesota last year, when only seven of his 481 passes were picked off.

Keenum said he awoke the morning after Denver's 27-24 win over Seattle and "I would say it didn't feel quite like I wanted it to feel after my first win as a Bronco. So, there's a lot of hunger. We're all very, very hungry to get out there and keep getting better this week."

The Broncos (1-0) host Oakland (0-1) on Sunday.

Despite the trio of interceptions, Broncos coaches didn't flinch in their faith of Keenum. The QB who teamed with Stefon Diggs to produce the Vikings' virtuoso shocker in the playoffs threw three touchdown passes, punctuating the Broncos' best offensive output since the 2015 finale with a frozen rope to a tiptoeing, tumbling Demaryius Thomas for the winning score.

Keenum also hit Emmanuel Sanders (10 catches for 135 yards) for his first touchdown since Week 2 last season, and rookie running back Phillip Lindsay for his first career TD, a 29-yard catch-and-run play.

Only one other time in Keenum's 43 NFL games has he thrown as many as three interceptions; in 2016 he was picked off four times by the Giants while with the Los Angeles Rams.

Keenum said he needs to relax and realize he doesn't have to press with such talent around him.

"I trust all those guys," Keenum said. "We've got some incredible playmakers that make plays downfield, and if anything, I just need to make sure when a shot's called, it's not necessarily a shot taken. Check the ball down and rely on those guys because I've got some really big-time playmakers, and let them do what they do.

"I don't have to do everything myself."

His interceptions led to two Seahawks touchdowns and thwarted a Denver drive.

"That's 17 points I'm responsible for," Keenum said.

Coach Vance Joseph liked the way Keenum bounced back from his errant throws.

"After the interceptions he had his best drives," Joseph said. "So, that speaks to his confidence. It speaks to him not folding."

Raiders coach Jon Gruden is also a fan of Keenum's and has been ever since interviewing him for his "QB Camp" show on ESPN in 2012, when Keenum came out of the University of Houston as the NCAA's career leader in completions, passing yards and touchdowns.

"I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really like Keenum," Gruden said. "What he did in college is unseen, the type of production that he had. I told our people a long time ago when I first got here I think THE free agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be Case Keenum."

Not Kirk Cousins, whom the Vikings turned to after Keenum led them to the NFC championship.

"What he did in Minnesota, the toughness that he put on tape," Gruden said, his voice trailing off in admiration. "He made a throw last week against Seattle, there were two or three Seahawks beating down on him — it's a 14-yard gain.

"His pocket presence, I think his personality, his fight, his grit, he gets the most out of himself. He's given them consistent, quality play at a position that they haven't had since (Peyton) Manning left."

Denver's 470 yards of offense was the most by the Broncos since the 2015 finale when Manning returned from a foot injury to rally Denver past the Chargers and vault them toward their Super Bowl 50 triumph.

Keenum is just as big a fan of Gruden's.

"I'm pretty sure he watched every rep that I'd ever played in college, he found some obscure tape from I don't know where," Keenum said. "It was a lot of fun. I got a lot good feedback."

One of Gruden's most scrutinized moves since returning to the sideline was sending pass rusher Khalil Mack to the Chicago Bears in a move that sent shockwaves throughout the league and also makes life easier on the Raiders' AFC West rivals.

"He's talented," Keenum said, "but I'm pretty sure they're going to play 11 guys. They're not just going to put 10 out there without him."

In a conference call with reporters in Denver on Wednesday, Gruden said he's been asked about the blockbuster trade ad nauseam "and rightfully so."

"He's a great guy. He's a great player. It's unfortunate we don't have him," Gruden said. "But we feel we did the right thing for this football team, for the future of the Raiders and for this building process.

"I know we've got to prove it. But so does he."

Emmanuel Sanders is back, and that's great news for Denver Broncos

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
September 13, 2018

Huey Chancellor was coaching the high school football team in Bellville, Texas, population 3,794, when he looked on the practice field and saw a skinny receiver/defensive back/wunderkind named Emmanuel Sanders.

Chancellor quickly realized Emmanuel was his fastest and finest player, the caliber of athlete who had never before and would never again play for the Brahmas of Bellville High School.

Then the surprise arrived.

The skinny kid was Bellville's toughest player, too. He wasn't just some diva wide receiver, although Emmanuel had — and has — some diva in him. He played with the fiendish attitude of a marauding linebacker. He was a complete football player.

"On crackback blocks, he would come up and hit you," Chancellor told me. "He was the best I ever had. He enjoyed knocking somebody off their feet as much as he enjoyed catching the ball. That was his personality."

It's still his personality. Off the field and out of pads, Sanders barely resembles an NFL player. He looks too small, too frail. He doesn't care. He sprints into the heart of NFL defenses, a dangerous destination, without fear. He remains the courageous soul who impressed Chancellor.

On Sunday, Sanders announced a comeback of sorts during the Broncos' victory over the Seahawks. After a 2017 season filled with injury, disappointment and confusion, Sanders roared to 10 catches and 135 yards in a 27-24 victory.

The focus after the game was on linebacker Von Miller, who was magnificent, and on quarterback Case Keenum, who was erratic, but Sanders' outburst might be the most encouraging slice of the victory.

At the end of the 2017 season, I wondered if Sanders was finished. He suffered from finger, ankle and shoulder woes, the toll of dozens of mega-hits in the secondary. And, maybe worst, he was grumpy, a vast change from the bubbly player who caught 253 passes from 2014-2016.

Of course, you would get grumpy, too, if you had to make a living catching passes from Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch.

At training camp, it was easy to see a new Sanders. A revived Sanders. A hopeful Sanders.

"I'm out here having fun," Sanders announced after catching his first Keenum passes. "It smells like football. It doesn't seem like it's so hard. It's easy and it's fun."

Keenum is a worthy NFL starting quarterback, a rank Siemian and Lynch never reached. (And never will reach.) If the Broncos fall behind by 14 points to, say, the Chiefs, the game won't be over. That's new. This is a dangerous offense that can score points rapidly. It's not 2013, when the Broncos rampaged to 606 points, but it's not 2017, either.

After the blowout against the Seahawks in Super Bowl 48, Broncos godfather John Elway embarked on an offseason of shopping. That offseason is best remembered for Elway's acquisition of linebacker DeMarcus Ware and cornerback Aqib Talib, a duo that transformed the defense from mediocre to ferocious.

Remember, Sanders was a brilliant and gutsy pickup, too.

But during most of 2017, it looked as if the Sanders show was drawing to a close in Colorado. He was a mere suggestion of himself.

On Sunday, Sanders announced his return in a wondrous few seconds. The Broncos trailed Seattle, 10-7, with 10:29 left in the second quarter. A gloom was coming over Mile High.

Keenum found Sanders sprinting alone over the middle. It quickly became a footrace to the end zone, which meant a horde of Seahawks had no chance.

Former Broncos receiver Mark Jackson, who once caught passes from Elway, has long admired Sanders, calling him a "warrior." Jackson watched as Sanders flipped into the end zone and kneeled quickly for a prayer of thanks.

"You know what I saw?" Jackson said. "A guy who is excited to be playing football. Literally, I could see that in Emmanuel."

We all could see it. Sanders, tough guy from Bellville, has returned in full force.

Jon Gruden, Derek Carr praise Von Miller: 'He's a walking Hall of Famer'

By Zach Pereles
DenverBroncos.com
September 13, 2018

After watching the Broncos record six sacks and force three turnovers against the Seahawks in Week 1, Raiders head coach Jon Gruden and quarterback Derek Carr had high praise for the Denver defense heading into their Week 2 matchup.

Outside linebackers Von Miller and Bradley Chubb drew plenty of those compliments after their strong effort.

"I like this defense," Gruden said. "... They have Von playing on the open side where he's very dangerous. They still can load the box with eight defenders because of their talented corners. The pressure, the threat of Chubb is a problem in your pass protection, because you don't want to isolate the wrong guy potentially against Chubb. We know what kind of future he has, and you always have to be careful with Miller. In their sub package, they're still very sophisticated. This is as good a defense as there is in football, I believe."

Miller was a force against the Seahawks, registering seven tackles, three sacks, two forced fumbles and one fumble recovery. When Seattle countered Miller with multiple blockers, other players found success. Chubb had a half sack on his first career play and finished with three tackles on the afternoon. Fellow pass rusher Shaquil Barrett had a sack that resulted in a 22-yard loss. The Seattle backfield was under fire for much of the afternoon, and the Seahawks' 64 rushing yards were their fewest since Week 8 of 2017.

"[Von] knows how I feel about him, but Bradley is a heck of a player obviously," Carr said. "I'm excited to play against him for the years to come. But obviously you can tell he's a really good player, a special talent just like everybody on that defense. That defense has always been stout, they've been able to maintain it."

The Raiders already faced one tough test in Week 1 against the Rams, a team that boasts standout defensive linemen Aaron Donald, Ndamukong Suh and Michael Brockers. Though Carr was only sacked once — a three-yard takedown by Brockers — he also threw three interceptions. The competition may not get any easier against Denver.

"I think Von is as good as it gets," Carr said. "Having him and Chubb has made him more dangerous, just like when [former outside linebacker] DeMarcus [Ware] was there. ... It makes it tough and with Von being who Von is. He's a walking Hall of Famer. Once he's done playing, he'll walk his way into Canton, and having Bradley there to help him out, take some pressure off of him, is great for Von. It's good for him, it's good for the defense."

Through My Eyes: Justin Simmons and the anatomy of an interception

By Justin Simmons
DenverBroncos.com
September 13, 2018

When I first saw the ball sail, I thought I was going to be a little short. What I planned to do was get one hand up, so maybe I could tip it for Adam Jones to come get it, or the next guy in coverage to come over and get it.

But as I kept getting more depth and got my eyes back, I just was athletic enough to get up and intercept it myself.

It all worked out.

I was on the same side of the field as Adam. There's a reason why he's been in the league for I don't even know how long. He just knows the game so well. And being that he was with Coach Joseph for a while in Cincinnati, he knows most of the things that we're doing, so it's the same terminology. So for him to come in and plug in in a week, get out there and have those snaps that he did is great. While we're out here game-planning, he's telling us, "Hey man, this is what we're doing. These are the looks we get out of these, all the different situations that we get." He's been amazing, man, and he's earned our trust big time.

It's third-and-7, and we know the blitz is coming, so you have to just get your eyes back. The quarterback might throw you one, or he might throw something out of bounds, or he might scramble and you've got to come down. He saw Brandon Marshall, thought he could loft it over my head and hit that honey-hole — that window spot — so I just high-pointed the ball. It was a great play call for the play they had drawn up.

It was a tie game at that point. Obviously we'd had some turnovers, so defensively we were like, "Man, we've got to get the ball back for the offense no matter what it looks like. Whether that's maybe a fourth-down stop, a turnover, an interception, a fumble recovery." We knew the Seahawks defense was getting tired and our offense was moving the ball against them.

Once I got the interception, I just kinda blacked out.

I was just excited obviously for some personal reasons but more for the team. I was just excited for the opportunity for us to take the lead and take control of the game heading into the fourth quarter.

Everyone congratulated me. Von came over and said, "Big-time play." Obviously he had a heck of a game and a big ball production day. That win wouldn't have happened without his production. Him coming over just saying "Big-time play" meant something.

Coach Joseph, Joe Woods, Marcus Robinson, they all came up and said, "Way to execute the call" and stuff like that. But that's what they expect. When they call something, we just gotta execute it. It was well-executed across the board. I just happened to be the one to get it.

At the end, though, we needed one more stop. We wanted to be out there. That's what great defenses thrive on: going out there and making the big-time plays when they matter, when the game's on the line.

We're thankful that we were able to pin them deep in the punt game. Once we knew we had them inside their 12, we knew that if we just executed, we were going to win that game. No timeouts, a minute left, I mean that's tough for an offense to go 90 yards down the field and score or at least get a field goal. We were just excited to kind of cement the 2018 opener. We expected to get back out there one more to get a big-time stop, and that's what we did. In the two-minute defense, you gotta be able to stand up and get some stops.

When you win, it's excitement more than anything else. It doesn't matter how you get the win as long as you win. You look back at last year, and you look at some of the top teams that went far in the playoffs, and some of their wins through the season, they're not always pretty, but they found a way to win the football game.

We hit adversity, the guys battled through, and we found a way to win. That's what's most important.

Raiders HC Jon Gruden on former 'Gruden's QB Camp' guest Case Keenum: 'The free-agent acquisition in pro football this year'

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
September 13, 2018

When the Broncos face the Raiders this weekend, quarterback Case Keenum will have a fan on the opposing sideline.

Raiders head coach Jon Gruden called the Broncos' quarterback "the free-agent acquisition in pro football this year" when he spoke to the Denver media on Wednesday afternoon.

"I've been accused of liking everybody, but I really like Keenum," Gruden said. "What he did in college is unseen — the type of production that he had. I told our people a long time ago when I first came here, I think the free-agent acquisition in pro football this year is going to be Case Keenum.

"What he did in Minnesota, the toughness that he puts on tape — he made a throw last week against Seattle.

There were two or three Seahawks beating down on him, it's a 14-yard gain. His pocket presence, I think his personality, his fight, his grit — he gets the most out of himself. I'll bet you ask all those players, they have a ton of respect for him. He's given them consistent, quality play at a position that they haven't had since [Peyton] Manning left."

Gruden's relationship with Keenum goes back several years to when the Houston product joined the then-ESPN personality on "Gruden's QB Camp."

The pair broke down a handful of Keenum's plays at Houston and also spent time doing an on-field workout.

"You know what I love about you Keenum?" said Gruden in 2012 on the show after one of Keenum's better throws. "You've got some serious guts, man.

"... This isn't inflated production. This is NFL Pro Bowl production."

Keenum reflected Wednesday on his experience on the show, which featured many of the top quarterback prospects each year.

"It was a lot of fun," Keenum said.

"He was literally a grinder. It was back in his studio, in his office where it looks like a TV set with all the film behind it, but that was actual film that he stays in there and watches. I'm pretty sure he had watched every rep I'd played in college. [He] found some obscure tape from I don't know where. It was a lot of fun. I got a lot of good feedback and enjoyed it.

“He gave me some good encouragement, talking about the game at the pro level. I really appreciated being able to be on it.”

Against the Raiders on Sunday, he’ll look to put that long-ago advice to good use.

NFL players' protests are now scarce, but social causes — as well as Colin Kaepernick and Eric Reid — deserve spotlight

By Jarrett Bell
USA Today
September 13, 2018

Malcolm Jenkins didn't protest during the national anthem before the Eagles and Falcons kicked off the NFL season last week. He didn't raise a fist, as he's done in the past. Didn't stay in the tunnel, as was the case before a preseason game. And he's never knelt.

Yet the Eagles safety continues to get his message out. During pregame warmups, he has worn T-shirts — and inspired teammates to do likewise — blaring enlightenment. Last week his shirt read, “Ca\$h bail = poverty trap.”

On Tuesday, Jenkins and teammate Chris Long released a powerful, 90-second video on social media that expanded on that theme. They opened by narrating examples of human victims. They gave a quick primer on the bail system and hammered home that too many people — 70% of those in jail, they contend, have not been convicted — are too poor to purchase freedom before their trials. They concluded their presentation by urging the end of the cash bail system.

Talk about impact players.

Jenkins, 30, one of the co-founders of the Players Coalition, has taken his activism in myriad ways beyond protests — during minicamp, he even stood silent at his locker displaying poster boards with hand-written messages — as a means of advancing his causes while minimizing controversy.

That's not to suggest that Colin Kaepernick, the man who used the NFL stage to launch a national conversation about police killings of unarmed African-Americans and other social injustices, wasn't effective in kneeling in protest during the anthem. Jenkins has just taken a different track. This is not about either-or ... although you'd suspect it is for the revenue-and-image-conscious NFL.

“Everyone has their own passions and convictions,” Jenkins told USA TODAY Sports. “I never try to tell anyone to do what I'm doing. The biggest thing is that everybody knows what the message is and why we're having a conversation about it. As best we can, we're trying to push attention toward specific things.”

With the NFL still lacking a hardline policy this season, backing off a measure that owners passed in May (while continuing to discuss the matter with the players' union), player protests during the anthem were scarce during the first week of regular-season games. That's pretty much what happened a year ago, too, before President Trump's infamous “get that son of a bitch off the field” declaration sparked more demonstrations and, strikingly, more interest from NFL owners in supporting players on addressing social issues.

The Week 1 scorecard: Jenkins' teammate, defensive end Michael Bennett, took a seat on the bench toward the end of anthem. Raiders running back Marshawn Lynch did not stand for the song before Monday's game against the Rams. In Denver, Broncos receiver Demaryius Thomas and linebacker Brandon Marshall remained in the locker room. In Miami, Dolphins defensive end Robert Quinn raised a fist, as is his custom, while receivers Kenny Stills and Albert Wilson knelt.

In a league with nearly 2,000 players, just two players knelt. NFL crisis in check?

That two players knelt – while Kaepernick and Eric Reid, the former San Francisco 49ers safety who knelt at his side, pursue collusion grievances against the NFL – was also important.

In the face of potential backlash and controversy, at least Stills (who has knelt for two years) and Wilson had the freedom to express themselves. That's the American way.

While Jenkins and others are to be commended for their social efforts, the fact that two Dolphins took a knee was a reminder of the plight of Kaepernick and Reid.

Kaepernick is featured in the moving Nike ad campaign, but he still doesn't have a job in the NFL. That's plain wrong. Did you see Nathan Peterman get a chance to open the season as the Buffalo Bills starter? Now Peterman has been benched. Again.

Reid, also in his prime years, can't latch on with a team. The Falcons sure can use a safety, with Keanu Neal done for the season with a torn ACL.

Signing Kaepernick and Reid for legitimate opportunities would be quite a message about now.

In any event, there's progress on other fronts. Commissioner Roger Goodell spent Tuesday at a criminal justice symposium in New Orleans as part of a "Listen and Learn" tour organized by the Players Coalition, joining Saints players Demario Davis, Benjamin Watson and Cameron Jordan, as well as team owner Gayle Benson. They spent hours in Magistrate Court with lawyers from the Orleans Public Defender's office, getting a close-up view of the bail system that players are trying to reform.

It was the latest in a series of community-oriented engagements that Goodell has participated in with players. Some of those events occurred even before an unprecedented summit last fall with players and the subsequent commitment from the league to partner with players in a \$90 million social justice initiative.

It reminded me of a July interview with Jocelyn Moore, the NFL's new executive vice president for communications and public affairs.

"Action is important," Moore told USA TODAY Sports. "The overarching goal is reflected in the work currently being done to change policy, change laws."

Moore touted a number of objectives on the players' agenda but was careful in trying not to connect any dots to the prospects of anthem protests. Of course, when the NFL collaborated with the Players Coalition, the partnership sure gave many the perception of an action item to squash protests.

“We have to be careful,” Moore said, asked about using the NFL platform for social causes. “We have to play football.”

And sell football.

Jenkins, meanwhile, loves the Nike commercial featuring Kaepernick, with his message of being willing to sacrifice – namely his football career – for a cause.

“I think it’s right on time,” Jenkins said. “For someone like him, especially, as demonized as he’s been.”

Jenkins hopes that a residual effect of the Nike campaign is that “in a world where people are telling us to shut up and dribble or whatever ... it creates a safe space for other people to get behind players and athletes that want to be positive with impact in the community.”

It’s also notable that in an open letter published before the season opener, the Players Coalition acknowledged Kaepernick’s inspiration and “act of patriotism to forfeit your job to fight for others.”

It’s just too bad that in an NFL that wraps itself in patriotism, Kaepernick and Reid don’t have jobs – which would send quite the message about progress from protests.

Agent's Take: Here are eight contract-year players who can cash in with a big 2018

By Joel Corry
CBS Sports
September 13, 2018

Multiple NFL teams were proactive in signing players to contract extensions between the opening of training camps and the start of the regular season. The effect is twofold. Players who would have been highly sought after in free agency or franchise-tag candidates were taken off the market. The early extensions allowed teams to lock up very-good-to-great players for a number of years at more affordable rates than if their contracts had expired.

Most notably, interior defensive lineman Aaron Donald and edge rusher Khalil Mack became charter members of the \$20 million-per-year non-quarterback club. Donald was the first to break the barrier when the Rams gave him a six-year, \$135 million extension with \$86.892 million in guarantees. Less than 48 hours later, Mack signed a six-year, \$141 million extension containing \$90 million in guarantees where a non-quarterback record \$60 million was fully guaranteed in conjunction with his trade from the Raiders to the Bears.

David Johnson helped solidify the dramatic reset of the running back market that Todd Gurley started with the four-year, \$57.5 million extension (worth a maximum of \$60 million through realistically achievable salary escalators) he received from the Rams in July. Hours before the Cardinals' regular-season opener against the Redskins, Johnson signed a three-year, \$39 million extension with \$31,882,500 of guarantees. The deal is worth a maximum of \$45 million through incentives.

When I was an agent, I would usually recommend that a client accept a contract extension before the season if a deal contained at least 95% of what I perceived his market value to be and had a favorable structure. The player gained financial security without incurring the risk of injury or poor performance that could depress his value in the open market.

So, who can cash in with a big 2018 season? Here's a look at one player from each division to keep an eye on during their contract year.

AFC North
Le'Veon Bell
PIT • RB • 26

Bell angered several of his teammates, particularly on the offensive line, when he didn't sign his \$14.544 million franchise tender in time to play in the season opener against the Browns. He is foregoing \$855,529 for each week he remains unsigned.

Bell and his agent, Adisa Bakari, are concerned that a heavy usage season will impact his ability for a huge payday in 2019, presumably as an unrestricted free agent. Bell led the NFL with 321 rushing attempts and 406 touches (combined receptions and rushing attempts) in 2017 despite sitting out the season finale for precautionary measures with the playoffs looming. James Conner's Week 1 league best of 135 rushing yards and 192 yards from scrimmage while replacing Bell should help alleviate some of the concerns about his workload if and when he returns to the Steelers.

Conventional wisdom suggests that Bell will sign his tender at some point before 4 p.m. ET on Nov. 13, which is the Tuesday after Week 10's games. This is the signing deadline for draft picks, unrestricted free agents getting a May tender and players with restricted free agent, franchise or transition tenders. If these types of players remain unsigned after this date, they are prohibited from playing during the 2018 season. A franchise player hasn't sat out a full season since Chiefs defensive end Dan Williams did so in 1998.

Playing this season will ensure that Bell won't get franchised for a third and final time in 2019. The procedures outlined in the NFL's Collective Bargaining Agreement dictate that Bell's third tag will be the greater of 144 percent of his second franchise designation (his current tender) or the largest number at any position, which is almost always quarterback. Assuming the 2019 salary cap is in the \$190 million neighborhood, the quarterback number should be approximately \$25 million.

Bell will be looking to replace Gurley, whose deal averages \$14.375 million per year, as the NFL's highest-paid running back next offseason. Gurley has a running-back record \$45 million in guarantees. The way Gurley's contract is structured, he is assured of making the \$40 million in the first three years running through the 2020 season, if not the \$49 million over the first four years. Contract security will be very important to Bell. A lack of guaranteed money led to Bell rejecting a five-year deal reportedly in the \$14 million to \$15 million per year range containing a \$10 million signing bonus prior to the mid-July deadline for franchise players to sign multi-year contracts.

Others: John Brown, WR, Ravens; Tyler Eifert, TE, Bengals; C.J. Mosley, ILB, Ravens; Terrell Suggs, DE/OLB, Ravens; Tyrod Taylor, QB, Browns

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AFC South

Jadeveon Clowney

HOU • OLB • 90

The Texans put a Clowney extension on hold because of his slower-than-expected recovery from minor knee surgery performed early in the offseason, which was a reminder of the injuries that defined his first two NFL seasons. The 2014 first-overall pick missed all of Houston's offseason activities because of the surgery.

Clowney, who has a \$12.306 million fifth-year-option salary, seems destined for a non-exclusive linebacker franchise tag in 2019 with good health, since Houston has longstanding policy against in-season contract negotiations. The linebacker number is expected to be in the \$16.325 million neighborhood next year assuming the 2019 salary cap is in the \$190 million range.

Clowney said the blockbuster contracts of Aaron Donald and Khalil Mack, fellow 2014 first-round picks, are giving him additional motivation. He posted a career-high 9.5 sacks and 64 quarterback pressures in 2017. Clowney should be able to join Donald and Mack in the \$20 million-per-year non-quarterback club in 2019 with a career year.

Others: Dante Fowler, Jr., DE, Jaguars; Tyrann Mathieu, S, Texans; Donte Moncrief, WR, Jaguars

NFC West

Earl Thomas

SEA • DB • 29

Thomas ended his holdout, which began before the June minicamp, because his "pay me or trade me" ultimatum to the Seahawks fell on deaf ears. Instead, the Seahawks gave contract-year extensions to two players, left tackle Duane Brown and wide receiver Tyler Lockett, who didn't withhold their services.

Thomas indicated that he was still receptive to remaining in Seattle after ending his holdout. The Seahawks aren't inclined to move Thomas before the Oct. 30 trading deadline. A first-round pick for Thomas would probably be too good for Seattle to turn down.

The four-year extension Thomas signed in 2014 averaging \$10 million per year made him the NFL's highest-paid safety at the time. The five-time All-Pro probably has his sights set on reclaiming his place at the top of the safety pay scale. Eric Berry is the current benchmark with the six-year, \$78 million contract containing \$40 million in guarantees he received from the Chiefs in 2017.

Thomas is a potential franchise-tag candidate. It will be \$12.48 million for Seattle to use the designation on him, which is 120 percent of his current \$10.4 million salary cap number.

Others: Deone Bucannon, LB/S, Cardinals; Frank Clark, DE, Seahawks; Larry Fitzgerald, WR, Cardinals; Markus Golden, DE/OLB, Cardinals; Lamarcus Joyner, S, Rams; Ndamukong Suh, DT, Rams; K.J. Wright, OLB, Seahawks

NFC East

Demarcus Lawrence

DAL • DE • 90

Lawrence has a great attitude about being franchised this year. He views the tag as an opportunity to break the bank in 2019, since a long-term deal couldn't be reached. He is taking the same attitude toward a second franchise tag as Chiefs safety Eric Berry did after playing on one in 2016. Lawrence is adamant about not doing it two years in a row, although a second designation in 2019 will be \$20,571,600 because of the CBA-mandated 20 percent increase from his current \$17.143 million figure.

Lawrence is coming off a breakout 2017 season in which he was selected to the Pro Bowl for the first time while tying for second in the NFL with 14.5 sacks. Proving that 2017 wasn't a fluke should put Lawrence in a position to get more than Giants defensive end Olivier Vernon after adjusting his deal to a 2019 salary cap environment. Vernon signed a five-year, \$85 million deal as an unrestricted free agent in 2016. His contract contains \$52.5 million in overall guarantees, of which \$40 million was fully guaranteed at signing.

Assuming the 2019 salary cap is in the \$190 million neighborhood, a deal equivalent to Vernon's would average slightly more than \$20.75 million per year. This type of interpretation of Vernon's contract will be particularly relevant because Vernon and Lawrence have the same agent.

Others: Landon Collins, S, Giants; Ronald Darby, CB, Eagles; Brandon Graham, DE, Eagles; David Irving, DT, Cowboys; Preston Smith, DE/OLB, Redskins

NFC North

Anthony Barr

MIN • OLB • 55

Barr appears to be the odd man out with the Vikings when it comes to contract extensions. Wide receiver Stefon Diggs, defensive end Danielle Hunter and inside linebacker Eric Kendricks all received offseason extensions.

Using a franchise tag on Barr, who is playing under a \$12.306 million fifth-year option, in 2019 doesn't seem likely. It would be windfall for him because the number is primarily composed of 3-4 outside linebackers who function as pass rushers. The 2019 linebacker franchise tag projects to approximately \$16.325 million, assuming a \$190 million salary cap next year

Barr may be looking to raise the bar for outside linebackers who aren't considered pass rushers whereas the Vikings could view Kendricks' deal as his salary ceiling. Browns 4-3 outside linebacker Jamie Collins is the standard with the four-year, \$50 million contract containing \$26.4 million fully guaranteed he signed in January 2017. Kendricks' five-year extension averages \$10 per year and has slightly under \$23 million in guarantees.

Others: Adrian Amos, S, Bears; Ziggy Ansah, DE, Lions; Ha Ha Clinton-Dix, S, Packers; Randall Cobb, WR, Packers; Clay Matthews, LB, Packers; Sheldon Richardson, DT, Vikings; Golden Tate, WR, Lions; Muhammad Wilkerson, DL, Packer

NFC South

Grady Jarrett

ATL • DT • 97

The Falcons tabled contract discussions with Jarrett's agent, Todd France, as the start of the regular season approached after a busy offseason in which quarterback Matt Ryan, left tackle Jake Matthews and safety Ricardo Allen received new deals. Jarrett cemented his status as one of the NFL's premier run-stuffing interior defensive linemen in 2017. The top of the market for these types of players is the \$12.5 million per year Linval Joseph received from the Vikings in a four-year extension he signed in 2017 with \$31.5 million of guarantees.

Jarrett has displayed more ability to put pressure on quarterbacks, particularly with his three-sack performance in Super Bowl LI against the Patriots, than most of the other interior defensive linemen who are a force against the run. He had a career-high 39 pressures (combined sacks, quarterback hurries and quarterback hits) in 2017. France may be looking at the six-year extension he got Eagles defensive tackle Fletcher Cox averaging \$17.1 million per year with \$63.299 million of guarantees in 2016 as a benchmark for Jarrett.

The Falcons aren't opposed to doing extensions during the season. Cornerback Robert Alford and right tackle Ryan Schraeder signed new deals during the latter part of the 2016 season. Jarrett probably needs to take his pass rushing to another level in the first half of this season for the Falcons to feel more comfortable putting him in the same salary stratosphere as Cox. The top interior pass rushers routinely exceed 50 quarterback pressures in a season. Cox was coming off a 2015 season where he had 77 quarterback pressures when he signed his deal.

Others: Kwon Alexander, ILB, Buccaneers; Mark Ingram, RB, Saints; Ali Marpet, C/OG, Buccaneers; Daryl Williams, OT, Panthers

AFC East

PROFILE Kelvin Benjamin

BUF • WR • 13

Benjamin curiously blamed Panthers quarterback Cam Newton last month for not being as productive as Odell Beckham, Jr., Brandin Cooks and Mike Evans, who were also taken in the first round of the 2014 NFL draft, during his three and half seasons in Carolina. The 28th overall pick in 2014 didn't exactly set the world on fire after being traded to the Bills in the middle of last season. He caught 16 passes for 217 yards with one touchdown in six games.

Benjamin posted career highs of 73 receptions, 1,008 receiving yards and nine touchdown catches as a rookie in 2014 with Newton throwing to him. Matching or exceeding these marks this season will be quite an accomplishment with 2017 fifth-round pick Nathan Peterman, who has looked lost in his NFL starts, and 2018 seventh-overall pick Josh Allen, who is a work progress, under center for Buffalo. Doing so could allow Benjamin to top the five-year, \$72 million extension (worth up to \$81 million through salary escalators) with \$40.007 million in guarantees Stefon Diggs recently received from the Vikings, given the explosion of wide receiver salaries in free agency this year.

Others: Quincy Enunwa, WR, Jets; Trey Flowers, DE, Patriots; Stephen Gostkowski, K, Patriots; Terrelle Pryor, WR, Jets

AFC West

Matt Paradis

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Brian McLaughlin, Paradis' agent, confirmed to Mike Klis of Denver's 9News in early August that discussions about a new deal had taken place. It is unknown how much progress has been made.

The 2014 sixth-round pick really came into his own in 2016. Paradis, who was given a \$2.914 million second-round free agent tender in the offseason, had followed up his 2016 campaign with a 2017 season in which he didn't allow a sack. He hasn't missed an offensive snap over the last three seasons despite nagging hip injuries that have required surgery.

Paradis could strike gold in 2019 on the open market with another good performance this season. Offensive linemen have been the biggest beneficiaries of the free agency spending spree during the last two years. The Buccaneers made Ryan Jensen the NFL's highest-paid center on a deal averaging \$10.5 million per year containing \$22 million in guarantees after his first NFL season as full-time starter in 2017 with the Ravens. Paradis has at least been the equal of Jaguars center Brandon Linder and Seahawks center Justin Britt, who signed extensions averaging \$10.34 million and \$9 million per year, respectively, during the 2017 preseason.

Others: Shaquil Barrett, DE/OLB, Broncos; Jared Cook, TE, Raiders; Dee Ford, DE/OLB, Chiefs; Denzel Perryman, ILB, Chargers; Bradley Roby, CB, Broncos; Tyrell Williams, WR, Chargers

NFL helps itself by helping players with drug issues

By Mike Florio
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When Browns receiver Josh Gordon didn't show up for training camp under circumstances that were sold and reported as Gordon making the decision on his own, something seemed fishy. When he returned to camp with his ability to practice and play hinging on league approval, it became more obvious that the league had a hand in Gordon's absence.

That's significant because, given his status under the substance-abuse program, there's not much gray area. For players who return from a minimum banishment of one year, they land in Stage 3 permanently. One false move is supposed to result in another banishment, with the ability to apply for reinstatement after another one-year absence.

But the NFL isn't applying the policy quite as stringently as it may have in the past, apparently giving players like Gordon, Martavis Bryant, and Randy Gregory the benefit of the doubt instead of throwing them out of the league.

Nearly three months ago, a report emerged that the Raiders were bracing for the league to suspend Bryant for at least a year. The Raiders cut Bryant earlier this month, under the apparent assumption that the shoe of Big Shield justice was going to drop on Bryant, again. Indeed, coach Jon Gruden openly mused about bringing Bryant back next year.

And now the Raiders are on the verge of bringing Bryant back this year.

In Dallas, a similar dynamic seems to be playing out with Gregory, a promising defensive end whose career has been derailed by substance-abuse issues. He reportedly had a relapse in August. Under the terms of the policy (and given the league's past throw-the-book-at-them precedent), Gregory should be gone for at least another year. He's not, and he may not be.

While it would be nice to attribute this potential epiphany to altruism, the NFL in helping players with off-field issues is helping itself. Bryant, Gregory, and Gordon are great performers who make the game more compelling. At a time when ratings are down and the supply of highly-talented players could become more limited, why force great players out of the game over issues that have nothing to do with their employment?

If that's indeed what's occurring, it's smart for the league to quit looking for ways to keep players who smoke marijuana or use other recreational drugs from playing and to start finding ways to keep them on the field and help them in the process.