

# Broncos should look at Saints' RB Chris Ivory in free agency

By Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
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Today's question about the Broncos comes from Chad Olsen in Bozeman, Mont.:

**Q:** There's been plenty of talk about the Broncos going after Steven Jackson and Shonn Greene. What about New Orleans running back Chris Ivory? He is relatively young, has low mileage, has an impressive yards-per-carry average and would be relatively inexpensive in the free agent market...

**A:** Chad, a perceptive call on your part. In terms of financial demands and potential output, Chris Ivory deserves a long look from any team in search of a back with some size.

A fringe player for the Saints — he has eight starts and 256 carries in the last three seasons combined — the 222-pound Ivory could likely contribute in some kind of rotational system. And his 5.1 yards per carry average over his career shows he has some pop, including a 56-yard touchdown run against the Falcons this past season.

He does run to contact plenty and takes some hits, so there are some injury concerns that would come with more playing time.

All of that said Ivory, who consistently said publicly he never really got an explanation as to why he was buried so deeply on the Saints depth chart despite the production when he played, is a restricted free agent.

So, under the collective bargaining agreement, the Saints will tender Ivory a one-year offer in the coming days. The Saints do have plenty of salary cap woes at the moment, so they may not be able to tender all of their restrictive free agents as highly as they would have in some other years.

Restricted free agents can receive offers from other teams, but the Saints would have the right to match the offer or receive compensation for losing the player to another team based on the original tender offer.

The lowest tender is a one-year, \$1.323 million deal. If the Saints tendered Ivory there, they would received no compensation from any team that signed Ivory to an offer sheet the Saints didn't match because Ivory was originally signed as an undrafted rookie.

The next highest tender is \$2.023 million and would carry a second-round pick as compensation. The highest tender is \$2.879 million and carries a first-round pick as compensation.

The Saints have some tough choices, given their cap woes, because just from talking to people around the league, if they tender a young player like Ivory (he's 24), who has flashed some big-play ability to go with a hard-nosed style, with the lowest tender, another team would certainly sign him to an offer sheet without having to surrender any compensation in return.

A second-round tender would be pricy, but the Saints' cap troubles may prevent them from doing that with so many other needs on their roster. So what tender the Saints offer to Ivory will have a lot to say about another team's ability to sign him, Broncos included.

In terms of Bolden, the Broncos have every intention of him competing for far more playing time in the defense. They'll look hard at, and likely take, at least one cornerback in the draft, but with Tracy Porter an out-bound free agent after one injury-marred season with the Broncos, the Broncos want more size in the lineup and more competition across the board.

Chris Harris and Champ Bailey figures to be the starters and the Broncos want Bolden to play his way into the nickel (five defensive backs) and dime (six defensive backs) looks. Bolden suffered a dislocated shoulder in the playoff loss to the Ravens, but by all accounts his rehab has gone well this offseason and has continued to get treatment at the Broncos' Dove Valley complex.

At the end of the season John Elway was asked about Bolden's future and he said;

"Omar's a competitive, young, tough guy that did a heck-of-a job on special teams for us this year. It's funny, (coach) John (Fox) and I were sitting, having breakfast ... and his comment was, 'I'm coming back next year to take somebody's job.' I said, 'I like that. I like that attitude'."

And they're hopeful Boden follows through with that prediction when they get back to work.

# Even Alabama can't always escape NFL's critical pre-draft analysis

By Jeff Legwold  
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NFL decision makers love to grade prospects from Alabama. They love to sign them and they love to toss them into the starting lineup as soon as the calendar enables them to do it.

Not like. Love. After all, Nick Saban runs his Crimson Tide program, in terms of on-field expectations and the content of the playbooks, much like an NFL team does its business.

Saban recruits those who are among the most gifted and the most committed players in the nation. They have won three of the last four national titles playing the kind of overwhelming physical, power football that has loaded the trophy case in Tuscaloosa.

Last season there were four of Saban's players selected in the first round of the NFL draft and eight were selected overall, tying the program's highest total. And this year figures to be much the same with players such as cornerback Dee Milliner, offensive linemen Chance Warmack, D.J. Fluker and Barrett Jones, linebacker Nico Johnson and running back Eddie Lacy dotting the board.

There is no disputing the results and the potential.

However, to say those calling the shots in personnel around the league have no concerns about what the future may hold for those on that immensely talented list would be false. Those paid to worry do feel like there is a component they have to factor in for the Tide players as they break down the boards.

And it has to do with workload. There is a feeling some of the Tide's prospect, in the relentless pursuit of titles in the ultra-powerful Southeastern Conference may have a few more football miles already on the odometer than some others simply because of their success.

That they may hit more in practice than most teams, play in an elite league and play deep into the bowl season because of their consistent proximity to the No. 1 ranking.

Or as Johnson put it at the combine;

"Before the SEC championship, we were beat up, we were beat up bad. By losing to Texas A&M — because we were beat up throughout the whole year — it reminded

us how important everything was for us. We were beat up that Texas A&M week and we lost. Going through that taught us a lesson. No matter how bad we feel, we still got to go and perform our best. That's what we did. We went out and tried to perform our best and push through that game. After that, everybody kind of got healthier and went out in the national championship game and did our best."

"I feel like we practice way harder than the game situations so like I said, it's hard but we do it and we're very prepared when game day comes," Lacy said.

This year cornerback Dee Milliner worked out at the NFL's scouting combine, but will have shoulder surgery March 12. Lacy did not work out because of a hamstring injury, and Johnson didn't work out because he had surgery to repair a sports hernia.

Last year, safety Mark Barron didn't work out at the combine because of sports hernia surgery and Trent Richardson didn't work out because he had just had the meniscus repaired in his left knee — he had an additional surgery on the left knee during Browns training camp to remove a piece of cartilage. Dre Kirkpatrick didn't do the bench press at the combine because he said he had right shoulder injury, then suffered a knee injury just before Bengals training camp opened and eventually finished the year on injured reserve.

Courtney Upshaw missed one of the Tide's pro days because of tendonitis in his knee and had not worked out at the combine, telling teams he needed more time to train.

Last year it didn't affect the draft status of Barron, Kirkpatrick or Richardson — all three were picked among the first 17 picks. And this year Milliner's status won't be affected as he and most of the Tide's offensive linemen will dot the opening round, as Lacy and Johnson will still be good bets as second-day picks.

And they wouldn't change a thing. They played, they won and did what folks do in college, prepared themselves to enter the workplace with the best résumé possible.

But when all is said and done in creating grades for NFL prospects, it has become at least a small part of the process for those who have won the biggest games for college football's best program.

# Flacco, Brady on opposite ends of QB contract spectrum

By Peter King  
Sports Illustrated  
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I'll get to the news of the week in the never-ending NFL news cycle in a few moments, but let's start with the elephant in the room in the wake of the Tom Brady contract. A majority of you seem skeptical (and that's putting it mildly) that Brady did a good thing for the Patriots the other day.

This is what I hear from people in the media business and on Twitter, by and large: *The three-year, \$27 million contract extension's a phony deal.*

Or, put another way: *He'll never play for \$7 million, total, in 2015. The quarterback and the Pats have to have some agreement -- tacit, at least -- to re-do the deal if Brady's still Brady then.*

This, first, from the man who birthed the idea of the Brady extension and broached it to Brady in painstaking detail when they flew alone together from Massachusetts to Los Angeles the week after the Patriots' season ended:

"No, no, no," Patriots owner Robert Kraft told me. "This is a real deal. Look at our track record. We don't do fake deals. The contract we have with Tom Brady is a real contract we will both live by."

Kraft said he had "been thinking about this for three or four years. I was probably wearing my fan hat as much as anything else. I just didn't want to ever see this become like Joe Montana leaving San Francisco, Emmitt Smith leaving Dallas, Brett Favre leaving Green Bay, Peyton Manning leaving Indianapolis. If Tom Brady played out this current contract and left us, there was no doubt in my mind that someone out there would pay him top dollar, and they should, for his ability, his leadership and his unselfishness.

"I was just trying to stay ahead of the curve. If we were going to have to pay him elite-quarterback money and have elite-quarterback cap numbers, I just didn't think we would be able to build a team. We don't want to have a team where we're paying 18 to 20 percent to a player on the cap. I wanted to do something elegant that would work for everybody. I had been talking to him off and on for maybe 18 months, about how I wanted him to finish his career here, and about how we both have to be smart about it. I just really want him to end his career a Patriot."

So Kraft and Brady boarded the plane five weeks ago, and Kraft laid out the rough vision he had for the deal. "We had a lot of time to talk," Kraft said. "Six hours." Kraft wasn't exact with the terms that day, but he got the idea across. The Patriots, essentially, would convert all the money in the last two years of his current deal to

guaranteed money in the form of bonuses to be paid out between now and 2015. The Patriots would add \$3 million to the deal now. In exchange, Brady would extend the deal three years for significantly less money than the market would yield if he were free two years from now -- it turned out to be \$7 million in 2015, \$8 million in 2016 and \$9 million in 2017 -- with one valuable proviso. If Brady were healthy enough, year by year, to continue playing after the 2014 season, the salaries in each of his last three years would be guaranteed in the event of injury. (More about that later.)

"I presented an idea to him that I thought could work for both sides. He takes care of his body in terms of exercise and working out and his food. Tom's intake of food is, really, so healthy. He has a whole style of living that is so important to him ... We're taking a chance making this commitment, and he's taking one, in terms of his ability to maximize pay. I just thought if winning is the most important thing to him, and I think it is, and it certainly is to our family, this gives us the best chance to win. Hopefully we have an elite quarterback that, even if his skills decline even a little bit, he'll still be better than 90 percent of the quarterbacks in the league. And his legacy -- I already believe he's the greatest of all time -- if we win one or two more, he can solidify that."

When Brady and Kraft parted that day, Brady said he'd think about it, and discuss it with his agent, Don Yee, and his family. "I credit Don Yee for being supportive and not talking Tommy out of it," Kraft said.

"I am glad we are able to take negotiations out of this relationship for the next five years. Look, I don't know what's going to happen in the next five years. No one can know. But this move, strategically, helps us be in a position to win. We're going to spend to the cap. Tom knows that it's not like whatever we don't pay him we're putting in the Kraft family pocket. He gets it, and now he's rooting for us to make the right decisions in building the team. By the way, I have heard that it's been reported Tom made demands about who he wanted us to sign. Absolutely not. It never happened.

"I credit Tom for doing the right thing and thinking outside the box. That's what we're trying to do as an organization, and certainly what Bill Belichick tries to do as a coach. If you don't have a good coach and a quarterback, you don't have much of a chance to win. We are fortunate that we have both who are way above par. Tom is everything that we want.

"In life, the best deals are the deals that are good for both sides. You have to understand what is most important for both parties. You do the deals that work well both ways. I'm not sure we will ever see anyone like him again. Being the 199th pick in the draft, I think he's always worked harder and fought harder, and I think he's able to think differently because nothing has ever been handed to him. I wanted to get this done fast so we could create room for free agency, room on the cap over the next two years when the cap was too tight. If this thing took three or four months, we would have lost that window."

You know, I told Kraft that there will be many who don't buy the blue-skies-and-sunny-days story line here. They'll be waiting to see what the Pats do in the spring of 2015, when so many are sure they'll rewrite the contract to make Brady the fourth-highest-paid quarterback, not the 24th.

"These people don't know the relationship between Tommy and this team," he said. "Maybe they hate the Patriots, or they're jealous. I understand the naysayers are out there, but we want to build a team capable of winning every year, and while this is not perfect in every way, we think this will help us get there."

### **A couple of other points about the deal:**

**The guarantees.** Keep in mind Brady was going to make \$30 million in cash in the next two years, not guaranteed. Now he'll make \$33 million, guaranteed. (In many quarters, it was reported Brady was handed a new \$30 million signing bonus, but it wasn't new money -- just a guaranteeing of the money he was supposed to make in 2013 and '14, with a \$3 million sweetener added.) While guaranteeing the money is significant, think about it: What are the chances Brady wouldn't play for the Patriots in either of the next two seasons? Certainly he will be there in 2013, and the only way he wouldn't is with a *career-ending* (not *-threatening*) injury some time before opening day 2014. Some have compared that to Peyton Manning, and the Colts having no idea they would ever have cut Manning. The difference is, at a comparable point when the Colts would have had to make a similar decision on guaranteeing Manning's salaries, he already would have had one neck procedure and two serious bursa-sac knee surgeries in the very recent past, and I doubt owner Jim Irsay would have been terribly eager to guarantee him two huge-money years coming off that.

As for the other guarantees, the final three years will be guaranteed year by year. In some quarters it's been reported that Brady will have the final \$24 million guaranteed if he's healthy and able to play in 2015. In reality, the 2015 salary will be guaranteed if he's healthy entering that league year, and the 2016 and '17 salaries guaranteed similarly, year by year, if he's healthy.

Brady has \$33 million guaranteed today. The \$7 million, \$8 million and \$9 million salaries in 2015, '16 and '17 will be guaranteed, but only if Brady enters each of those league seasons healthy.

**Recent history.** Time will tell if the Patriots do for this contract what they have done often, but not exclusively, with contracts of stalwart players. Which is, basically, very little. Brady signed a contract in 2005 for six years and \$60 million (\$4 million per year, on average, below Peyton Manning's deal), and no new money was added to the deal (some was moved around for cap purposes, but no new bonuses) until year six. In 2010, he signed an extension for four years (2011-14); the existing 2010 season on his 2005 contract stayed in force, and his four-year extension was for \$78.5 million. He played the 2010, '11 and '12 seasons, and then the Patriots made this contract-for-life (presumably) deal. In the final New England

deals of Willie McGinest and Rodney Harrison, for instance, the Patriots moved money around for cap reasons but didn't add money.

When Brady signed in 2005, the deal called for \$5 million in salary and \$3 million in a roster bonus in 2008. Brady threw 50 touchdown passes, and the Patriots went 16-0 in 2007. And Brady still made \$5 million in salary and a \$3 million roster bonus in 2008, as scheduled.

My feeling is, out of principle, it's pretty unlikely the Patriots will re-do the deal in 2015, even if Brady's one of the lowest-paid starting passers in the league. He knew what he was getting into when he signed it. But we'll see.

Finally, I understand the skepticism about a player doing what Brady did, but looking at history, and listening to Kraft, I wouldn't count on this deal adding any new money in the next three seasons. Still want to debate it? I'll be happy to run your best emails in my Tuesday column, with my responses.

### **The rest of the Flacco story**

On the other side of the salary spectrum comes Joe Flacco. News broke from Jay Glazer Friday that Flacco and the Ravens had agreed on a six-year, \$120.6 million contract -- \$20.1 million a year, an average of \$100,000 more per season than the previous highest-paid player in football, Drew Brees. What I know now:

- The cap numbers in the first two years of the deal are approximately \$6.8 million and \$14.8 million, which should allow the Ravens to keep a player or two they really want to keep, such as wideout Anquan Boldin and left tackle Bryant McKinnie. I think defensive end Paul Kruger, a free agent, will get big money somewhere and won't return. I think it's looking more and more likely that the free-agent inside linebacker the team would like to keep, Dannell Ellerbe, will get a bigger offer elsewhere than the Ravens would be willing to pay. If so, he'll likely leave too.
- Baltimore will likely have to re-do the six-year Flacco contract after year three. Approximate cap number in year four: \$29 million. With the cap estimated roughly to be about \$130 million in that season, 2016, it's highly unlikely the Ravens would devote 22 percent of their cap to the quarterback.

I've also learned a little bit of history about the deal, and just how close the two sides came to making a five-year extension worth about \$17 million a year happen last year.

The Ravens and Flacco were going to leave the 2012 salary as is (\$6.76 million) and extend the deal five years, through 2017. The two sides were agonizingly close -- the Ravens wanted to pay Flacco \$15.5 million in the last year of the deal, unguaranteed, and Flacco's agent, Joe Linta, wanted \$17.5 million, unguaranteed. Keep in mind there's a very good chance the last year of the deal wouldn't have been kept intact anyway; it's likely the deal would have been re-done before that season. When the two sides met for the final time to try to get it done, the Ravens



were insistent on their 2017 number. Linta probably would have accepted if they'd split the difference at \$16.5 million. But the Ravens -- and who could blame them? -- thought they had extended themselves for a player who hadn't been a 4,000-yard quarterback yet.

In retrospect, the July 2012 position of the Ravens seems more understandable than Flacco's. Only three players in football would have been higher paid than Flacco under the Baltimore five-year extension offer; that seems more than fair. But Flacco felt so confident in his ability that he gambled on himself, then went out and had one of the best playoff months an NFL quarterback has ever had. Baltimore, as it turns out, had to pay \$3.1 million more per year than Flacco wanted last season.

And sure, the Ravens now probably wish they acceded to Linta's number last summer. But hindsight in contract talks is always 20-20. There's no way anyone (other than Flacco, maybe) could have forecast what Flacco did this postseason. So it's unfair to castigate Baltimore for not caving last year; I can't think of any team, given the same situation, that would have caved.

I found one more thing compelling in the Flacco deal. Linta is an agent for mostly middle-class players and free agent hopefuls. On the first day of the Scouting Combine, the day before Linta was to meet in Indianapolis with Ravens negotiator Pat Moriarty on the Flacco mega-deal, Linta was driving through a snowstorm into Carbondale, Ill., to the campus of Southern Illinois, to work out a free-agent outside linebacker prospect named Jayson DiManche. DiManche wasn't invited to the combine, but he's the kind of player who normally is Linta's stock in trade -- a *Rudy* type who might not get drafted but will end up in some team's camp with a prayer of making it. I've known Linta for a while, and he gets as excited about the Jayson DiManches as he does about the Joe Flaccos, because he doubles as a high school football coach in Connecticut and likes the underdogs. If he believes in a cause -- and he believed that Flacco was worth every dime he was seeking last summer -- he has no problem walking away from a deal that would have everyone screaming, "Take it!"

I just like the fact that the underdog quarterback won the Super Bowl, and the faithful agent backed him, and both were rewarded.

# Peyton Manning's touchdown on Bagram

By Staff Sgt. Dave Overson

March 4, 2013

BAGRAM AIRFIELD, Afghanistan (March 4, 2013) -- There are arguably tens of millions of football fans around the globe, and it is safe to assume that a great deal are fans of Super Bowl champion and current Denver Broncos quarterback, Peyton Manning. So when Manning touched down on Bagram Airfield, March 1, the service members assigned there were ecstatic.

In tow with Manning, as part of a USO tour, were a few sports celebrities to help entertain the troops. Major League Baseball hall of famer Curt Schilling delighted the crowd with inspiring words, along with National Football League's Austin Collie and Vincent Jackson.

"A lot of my family members served in the military, and this is an incredible honor for me to come here today and say thank you to all the men and women putting their lives on the line for all of us back home," said Schilling.

The host of the USO show, which was held in a modified tent, was Adm. James Winnefeld, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who had the honor of introducing two members of the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders. Both Cassie Trammell and Jackie Bob entertained the crowd with Cowboy's trivia and a dance routine.

Peyton Manning thrilled those in attendance by throwing a few passes into the crowd. Austin Collie, a wide receiver with the Indianapolis Colts, and Vincent Jackson, a wide receiver with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, assisted Manning on stage.

"It's truly inspiring to see all of the pride and hard work these men and women display every day here, and it makes me grateful to be an American," said Manning.

The musical portion of the tour comprised of Ace Young and Diana DeGarmo, of American Idol fame. The couple, incidentally who are engaged to one another, met on Idol's season 11 and have been touring with USO for the past two years.

"To be able to come here and perform for the troops is first and foremost an honor," said DeGarmo. "It's nice to be able to bring a small piece of home here and hopefully help put their troubles behind for just a moment."

"Getting to meet and talk to the Soldiers about their daily duties is quite the blessing for me. I really love what they all do for us back home," said Manning.

The entertainment concluded with a myriad of adoring service members obtaining autographs from their favorite sports celebrities. Whether it was Peyton Manning, or the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, it was obvious the crowd was walking a bit lighter when the tour rolled out to the next Afghanistan base.