

# Denver Broncos make big splash on first day of free agency

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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True story. On Monday afternoon, exactly 24 hours before the opening of NFL free agency, the Broncos had a Brinks truck back up into their parking lot.

The sign was there, parked perfectly between the lines at the team's Dove Valley headquarters. It was actually an armored Loomis company truck driven by a security guard armed with holster and satchel. But you get the point.

When free agency opened Tuesday, few teams were more eager to spend new money than the Broncos. For starters, the Broncos agreed in principle with Louis Vasquez, a right guard from the rival San Diego Chargers, on a four-year, \$23.5 million contract that guarantees his first two season payout of \$13 million.

Take that, Mike McCoy. He never got a chance to coach Vasquez. McCoy was the Broncos' offensive coordinator the past four years and he's the Chargers' head coach now.

"I wanted to be happy were I'm at," Vasquez said by phone Tuesday. "The location, the team I was going to play for — Denver's a great team and then you throw (quarterback) Peyton Manning in there and it's that much better. And then I was happy with the deal. I think it's going to be a great place for me."

The Broncos then re-signed their own defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson to a two-year contract expected to be worth between \$4 million and \$5 million. Vasquez said he prefers to play at 335 pounds and Vickerson played last season for the Broncos at 330 pounds.

When throwing around money, the Broncos put some weight behind it. The Broncos also set up visits with former Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall, Jacksonville defensive tackle Terrance Knighton, Philadelphia cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Arizona middle linebacker/special-teamer Stewart Bradley.

The team is also interested in Detroit safety Louis Delmas, but did not have a visit set up as of Tuesday night.

Actually, the Broncos didn't put a major dent into the Loomis truck. In balancing their potential spending spree on new players is their pay-cut request to defensive

end Elvis Dumervil and release Monday of linebacker D.J. Williams and his \$6 million salary.

Vasquez might wind up the team's biggest ticket item, in every sense of the word. Mendenhall is a terrific talent, but after a forgettable final season in Pittsburgh, he's willing to accept a one-year, make-good contract. He will also visit Arizona and Bruce Arians, the Cardinals' new head coach and the Steelers' former offensive coordinator.

The Cardinals have a notoriously bad offensive line and quarterback situation, so only a significant difference in contract offers figures to halt the Broncos from getting their new starting tailback.

Mendenhall is 225 pounds, the larger-sized back the Broncos would prefer as a complement to the smaller Knowshon Moreno and Ronnie Hillman. Imagine Mendenhall barreling behind a double-team block of the 335-pound Vasquez and 330-pound right tackle Orlando Franklin.

"Us playing next to each other, I think it will make us that much better," Vasquez said.

On the other side of the Broncos' line of scrimmage, it's possible Vickerson may team with Knighton to form a 660-pound interior wall. The 2013 Broncos aren't loading for Bear. They're loading for Giants, Colts, Chiefs, Cowboys, Redskins and anybody else on this season's schedule.

Even Bradley, at 259 pounds, is large as 4-3 middle linebackers go, and Rodgers-Cromartie is tall by cornerback standards at 6-foot-2.

Bradley was a two-year bust in Arizona's 3-4 scheme, but he was a starting middle linebacker in 2008 and 2010 for the Philadelphia Eagles, who then used a 4-3 system. Although the Broncos will give third-year player Nate Irving the chance to win the starting middle linebacker position, the NFL doesn't make a practice of handing a player something without competition.

Rodgers-Cromartie would become the Broncos' starting right cornerback if an agreement can be reached. He started his first three seasons in Arizona but became a bit lost in Philadelphia's overcrowded, overpaid secondary the past two years.

In summary, the Broncos attacked the first day of free agency as if they had their eye on the 2013 season's final day of competitive play. That would be Super Bowl XLVIII on Feb. 2, 2014, in the New Jersey Meadowlands Stadium.

Or a little less than 11 months from when the Broncos backed up the Loomis truck at Dove Valley.

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## **Broncos fly out of the starting blocks**

The Broncos were arguably the most aggressive team on the opening day of free agency Tuesday. They reached an agreement in principle with offensive guard Louis Vasquez and have visits set up with four players. NFL reporter Mike Klis analyzes:

### **OG Louis Vasquez, 6-foot-5, 335 pounds, 25 years old, Chargers**

**Stats:** Started 54-of-64 games in four seasons with Chargers.

**Comment:** Terrific run blocker who was considered the No. 2 free-agent guard, behind Andy Levitre.

### **RB Rashard Mendenhall, 5-10, 225, 25, Steelers**

**Stats:** Averaged 1,103 yards rushing from 2009-11 but had only 182 last season as he came off torn ACL.

**Comments:** Big upside, especially if Broncos get him on a one-year contract. But there are character, fumble and health concerns.

### **CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, 6-2, 182, 26, Eagles**

**Stats:** Played in 77-of-80 games in his five-year career. Has 16 career interceptions, but only three in his two seasons with Philly.

**Comment:** A taller corner that Broncos boss John Elway is seeking. The No. 16 overall pick in 2008 draft by Arizona.

### **DT Terrance Knighton, 6-3, 330, 26, Jaguars**

**Stats:** Played in 61-of-64 games. Had 79 tackles, 5½ sacks in his first two seasons, but only 51 and two in past two seasons.

**Comments:** Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio was Jags' head coach in 2009 when they drafted Knighton from Temple in the third round.

### **MLB Stewart Bradley, 6-4, 258, 29, Cardinals**

**Stats:** Just one start in 32 games the past two seasons in Arizona as he couldn't beat out Paris Lenon in 3-4.

**Comment:** Starting MLB for Philly, he signed five-year, \$30 million deal with Cards to play only special teams. Would compete with Nate Irving at MLB.

# Broncos' free-agency plan keeps Champ Bailey positioned at cornerback

By Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
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Today's question about the Broncos comes from Dileep Rao. To submit a question for consideration, send an e-mail to The Denver Post's Jeff Legwold.

**Q:** I love Champ Bailey. ... I consider him one of the greatest Broncos to ever play. He once said, that if he could see his play slip on film, he would shift to safety. He said he would notice it before anyone else and he would know. How does he feel about his play in the debacle against Baltimore? Bailey, a brilliant defender in coverage and tremendous tackler in space, was terribly beaten by Torrey Smith on several plays. Was this an illusion of blown coverages? Or is this a first step and Bailey simply hasn't seen it through pride or poor self-assessment? He's a favorite of mine; I am always excited to see him play. Just want to know where it stands. A legend is still human and no team can afford to indulge even a legend if he can't cover the swiftest players.

**A:** Dileep, the Broncos have their eye on the situation and believe they need a plan in place at the point when Bailey isn't the team's left cornerback. But when he was asked following the season if the playoff loss against the Ravens was the first step toward Bailey's potential move to safety, Broncos coach John Fox said, "I don't see that."

Fox broke into the NFL as a defensive backs coach. He spends a great deal of time with the position group on the practice field during the season. Those players are evaluated with a hard edge, and if the coaches believed the best move was to move Bailey to safety, there is no question they would quietly approach Bailey about that.

A big part of their plan in free agency is to find help at right cornerback — opposite of Bailey — and shore up the position enough overall so that Chris Harris can play in the slot for a defense that spent 65 percent of the defensive snaps in the nickel this past season.

The thinking is Bailey may need a little more help in coverage than they've given him in the past, but that he is still their best option at the position. I've asked several pro personnel people around the league in recent weeks for their unvarnished assessment of Bailey.

The consensus is he is still their best cornerback — and that Harris is vastly underrated — but that he isn't the player athletically he was four, five years ago, and they don't expect him to be. They still see a player who tackles better in the open field, and in the run game, better than most who have played the position, and a player with top-shelf instincts and intelligence who understands offensive concepts.

But their perspective is also that, much like at running back, the decline at cornerback comes quickly. So, they say they would take a hard look at Bailey through the offseason workouts and in training camp to see his readiness for his 15th season at the position.

In the playoff loss, Smith's first touchdown looks like a coverage bust, that Bailey is aligned with outside leverage at the snap and plays the play that way throughout Smith's route, even as the ball is thrown inside.

With outside leverage, or playing the outside shoulder of the receiver, that usually indicates he expects help on the inside from a safety. When Bailey sees he doesn't have help on the play, he tries to make up the ground he surrendered as he maintained his outside leverage, but couldn't do it against a player with Smith's speed.

The second touchdown Bailey simply misplayed the ball, a mistake on his part. Smith is one of the fastest receivers in the league and certainly a difficult matchup, but just four weeks before the playoff loss Bailey held him to one catch for 14 yards.

So, unless it all caved in on Bailey in the four weeks that followed, Bailey was a veteran player who had a bad outing on an extremely cold day when the Broncos had more than their share of coverage errors from everybody in the secondary.

When asked directly about playing safety at some point in his career, Bailey has said: "It just has to make sense to me. I'm not looking to play safety. So it would have to make sense, if it doesn't make sense I'm not doing it. I'm not going to do it just to do it, to save money on the cap or something. I'm a realist, though ... I'll know it's time to make a move, I'll be the first to see it, I'll be the first to know it."

He's also said he would consider it "into my 16th season or around there" and that would be 2014.

# NFL draft scouts in Colorado for Buffaloes, Rams pro days

By Jeff Legwold  
The Denver Post  
March 13, 2013

NFL scouts and other personnel executives will descend into Colorado on Wednesday for two of the state's major pro days.

Colorado will fill the morning with players also set to go during an afternoon session at Colorado State. As both programs continue to try to climb out of rough waters, the two stops aren't considered A-list events this year by the NFL's decision-makers.

And neither place has a player that will rise to the level 2011 when CU's Nate Solder packed them in in the weeks before he went to the Patriots with the 17th pick of the draft and Buffs cornerback Jimmy Smith went to the Ravens with the 27th pick. But there are still some players who can raise their stock with a little over a month to go before the draft.

A look at a few:

- **TE Nick Kasa.** The former Buffs defensive end definitely has the attention of offensive coordinators around the league in search of match-up problems for defenses. Teams love his size as a receiver - 6-6, 269 pounds — but have questions given he's so new to the position since a position switch in his junior year in Boulder.

Kasa caught the ball well at the Senior Bowl and has shown he can be a physical blocker. Among the prospects with local ties, he's the guy with a chance to be the biggest riser on draft day.

But there is a question as to how much Kasa will do Wednesday. Several scouts have said in recent days they believe Kasa suffered a hamstring injury at the scouting combine, so he may not be full speed in Boulder.

- **DT Will Pericak.** Pericak didn't get a combine invitation and he didn't get a Senior Bowl invitation so scouts haven't seen him up close since he turned some heads with his work at the East-West Game.

There are teams that see the high-effort Pericak as a potential fit in their defenses — some 3-4 teams even see a potential end. And given most scouts would say 75-80 percent of a player's evaluation is what he did during games, Pericak's quality

play during the Buffs' on-field struggles has put him on the radar — he started 48 games at Colorado.

If he can show some athleticism Wednesday, it could be that little boost he needs for teams searching for things to break the ties on their draft boards.

- **T David Bakhtiari.** Most teams see Bakhtiari as a future NFL guard at this point, but the scouts will come to Boulder wanting to see a little more from him in position drills. Hard to believe, but at 299 pounds Bakhtiari was the lightest offensive lineman who weighed in at the combine.

Bakhtiari entered the draft as an underclassman so the combine was really the first chance scouts had to see him in a workout environment since he made the decision to turn pro. They want to see a little more Wednesday.

- **T Ryan Jensen.** The CSU-Pueblo offensive lineman was considered one of the most highly-graded players not invited to the scouting combine. Jensen will take part in CSU's pro day in Fort Collins — it's an option for players who play for smaller programs to attend pro days at larger schools near their campus or near their hometown.

Jensen is expected to have another open workout in Pueblo in early April. As it stands right now the Vikings, Bengals and Seahawks are among the interested.

Though he was a four-year starter for the Thunderwolves, Jensen likely projects as a guard in the NFL. He has also snapped in recent workouts, including when Kansas State quarterback Collin Klein was preparing for the combine in suburban Denver, and has said he believes he could play center as well if it was needed.

Wednesday's workout might be a chance for him to show scouts he could do just that.

- **T Joe Caprioglio.** The Highlands Ranch graduate has been working out with Steadman-Hawkins trainer Loren Landow, in a group that included Jensen, Pericak and former Buffs linebacker Jon Major.

Caprioglio, whose junior season ended because of a knee injury (ACL), started 10 games this past season for the Rams. He has the size teams like at offensive tackle and without the benefit of any post-season all-star game appearances a good day Wednesday, could get him noticed.

# Ex-Chargers G Louis Vasquez, Broncos reach agreement on four-year deal

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
March 12, 2013

Never mind Peyton Manning's passes. The Broncos are going to try and maul defenses with runs to the right in 2013.

The Broncos have reached an agreement in principle with former San Diego Chargers guard Louis Vasquez on a four-year, \$23.5 million contract. The first two years at \$13 million are guaranteed. Vasquez becomes one of the 10 highest-paid guards in NFL history.

"Our firm looks at three criteria for our players: geography, money and ability to win a ring," said Robert Sheets, Vasquez's agent. "We think we hit on all three of those with this deal."

The deal still has some language to finalize, and Vasquez must pass his physical — which Sheets said will be a formality considering how hard he has been training the past month at the TEST Academy in San Diego.

"He is a big, powerful player who adds a physical presence to our OL," Broncos executive VP of football operations John Elway tweeted Tuesday.

The 330-pound Vasquez will replace Chris Kuper at right guard and team with 330-pound right tackle Orlando Franklin to give the Broncos arguably the NFL's most imposing right-blocking sides.

Kuper, the most experienced blocker on the Broncos offensive line, recently underwent a second surgery on his left ankle. He started only six games at right guard last season. The expectation is the Broncos will keep Manny Ramirez — who, like Vasquez, is from Texas Tech — as a backup.

"Lou is going to have to talk to Manny about that No. 65," Sheets said.



# Elvis Dumervil, Broncos resume contract talks but remain far apart

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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Elvis was just about to leave the building when the Broncos called him back.

Let's have another talk.

The Broncos and Elvis Dumervil's agent Marty Magid exchanged another round of contract proposals Tuesday. That's the good news for Broncos fans hoping the defensive end with 20 ½ sacks the past two years returns for the 2013 season.

The problem is a chasm in philosophy in how to re-do the \$12 million salary Dumervil is scheduled to make this season. The Broncos want Dumervil to accept a pay cut. No sugar. Just cut.

Magid sent back a proposal Tuesday that lowered his client's asking price from \$12 million in 2013, but then added that reduction onto his contract in the form of guarantees for the 2014 and 2015 seasons.

Dumervil is scheduled to make a non-guaranteed \$10 million in 2014 and \$8 million in 2015.

Fundamentally, pay cut vs. restructure remains the central issue in the contract disagreement. As it has been since Day One of their re-opened negotiations.

"We're saying the same thing today as we did yesterday: If you can't accept this proposal, then release us," said Magid. "The only thing that's different today is we exchanged proposals. They went up (from their original pay-cut proposal) this year and we went down (from \$12 million) for this year. But they're still trying to reduce the first year of this three-year deal and we're trying to restructure.

"We would hope that they feel our proposal puts us at common ground. We're willing to take a decrease this year to help the Broncos make a run at the Super Bowl, and they need to make a decision whether to keep him or not."

The Broncos will reach their decision before Dumervil's \$12 million salary becomes fully guaranteed on Saturday. Magid would have preferred a resolution as of 2 p.m. Tuesday when the free-agent market opened.

If the Broncos don't reach accord with Dumervil, the team is expected to try to sign Dwight Freeney, the former Indianapolis Colts defensive end who is fifth among active players with 107 ½ career sacks but had only five last season and recently turned 33.

# **Broncos re-sign Kevin Vickerson, still to visit Terrance Knighton**

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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The Broncos re-signed Kevin Vickerson, just a couple hours after the defensive tackle entered the free-agent market.

The Broncos and Vickerson's agent Drew Rosenhaus had enough contract details worked out before he hit the market at 2 p.m. Tuesday.

Vickerson started alongside Justin Bannan last season on the interior of the Broncos' defense. Vickerson took a paycut to \$1.2 million to stay with Denver last season.

The Broncos have also set up a visit with another 330-pound defensive tackle, Jacksonville's Terrance Knighton.

# **Broncos schedule visits with RB Mendenhall, CB Rodgers-Cromartie**

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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With the free-agent market open Tuesday, the Broncos have made arrangements to have former Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall visit their Dove Valley facility, according to an NFL source.

Mendenhall also is scheduled to visit the Arizona Cardinals. The former first-round draft pick from Illinois had back-to-back 1,100-yard seasons in 2009-10 with the Steelers, but suffered a torn ACL late in 2011, and struggled throughout the 2012 season. He is only 25 and is willing to accept a one-year, make-good contract.

The Broncos also have arranged a visit with Philadelphia cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie.

Meanwhile, the Broncos were unable to reach a contract agreement with defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson before the free-agent market opened at 2 p.m. Tuesday. Vickerson was a Broncos starter playing on a \$1.2 million salary in 2012.

# Broncos seeking to replace Elvis Dumervil as NFL free agency opens

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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A pass-rushing defensive end has transferred from not on the Broncos' offseason wish list to the very top as NFL free agency prepares to open at 2 p.m. Tuesday.

With Elvis Dumervil declining to take a proposed pay cut from \$12 million, the Broncos will quickly seek to replace him.

It won't be easy. Dwight Freeney is among the candidates, perhaps in no small part because he is a former teammate of Peyton Manning from their nine playing seasons together (2002-10) in Indianapolis.

During that nine-year span, Freeney made six Pro Bowls to Manning's nine.

Other pass-rusher possibilities could be Tampa Bay's Michael Bennett, Chicago's Israel Idonije, Detroit's Cliff Avril, Oakland's Matt Shaughnessy, the New York Giants' Osi Umenyiora and St. Louis' Michael Hayes.

Dumervil, who had 20½ sacks the past two seasons, has asked for his release by 2 p.m. Tuesday, but the Broncos are expected to wait until they have secured his replacement. Besides a pass-rushing defensive end from free agency, the Broncos also are planning to give more playing time to either Robert Ayers, their first-round pick in the 2009 draft, or veteran Jason Hunter, who missed last season with a triceps tear.

The Broncos also are expected to pursue former Pittsburgh running back Rashard Mendenhall in free agency, along with a right cornerback (there is interest in Philadelphia's Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie), offensive guard and defensive tackle (possibly Jacksonville's Terrance Knighton).

The team is expected to first attempt to line up visits with free-agent players Tuesday afternoon with the possibility of reaching agreements in principle as soon as Tuesday or Wednesday night.

# Terrance Knighton, Stewart Bradley slated to visit Broncos

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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Perhaps no team has been as aggressive in the early hours of free agency as the Broncos.

Add visits by Jacksonville Jaguars defensive tackle Terrance Knighton and Arizona Cardinals backup linebacker Stewart Bradley to the number of free agents scheduled to swing inside the Broncos' headquarters at Dove Valley.

Knighton is a 330-pound defensive tackle who was drafted in 2009 by Jack Del Rio when the Broncos defensive coordinator was the Jaguars head coach. Bradley was a backup linebacker the past two seasons in Arizona, although he started for the Philadelphia Eagles in 2008 and 2010.

The Broncos also will visit with Pittsburgh Steelers running back Rashard Mendenhall and Philadelphia Eagles cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, and they have reached an agreement in principle with former San Diego Chargers right guard Louis Vasquez.

The team's interest in Knighton may have picked up after the Broncos were unable to reach an agreement with their own free agent Kevin Vickerson, another 330-pound defensive tackle, before the opening of free agency at 2 p.m. Tuesday.

# Rashard Mendenhall or Steven Jackson? Who do you want Broncos fans?

By Mark Kiszla  
The Denver Post  
March 12, 2013

As NFL free agency opens, the Broncos are shopping for a running back. Makes sense. Coach John Fox likes to pound it on the ground. So a big, tough back capable of pushing the pile and chew the clock in the fourth quarter is a necessity in the Denver offense.

Question is: Which running back would you like to see Denver land? The Broncos have shown interest in Rashard Mendenhall of Pittsburgh. But fans are clamoring for Steven Jackson of St. Louis. Mendenhall, a 1,000-yard rusher for the Steelers in 2009 and 2010, is coming off a knee injury and has a history of spats with Pittsburgh management. Jackson, one of the few bright spots on a dull Rams team, is a workhorse who has nearly 2,400 carries on his resume and will turn 30 years old in August.

Peter Burns is intrigued by Jackson. I think Mendenhall could be signed at a decent price with a high risk/reward upside. Listen as we wage a big debate on these two big backs here:

Podcast: [Play in new window](#) | [Download](#)

What do you think? If you were Broncos executive John Elway, would you spend money in free-agency on Mendenhall or Jackson? Or would you look elsewhere, maybe to Shonn Greene of the Jets or Ahmad Bradshaw of the Giants?

# Broncos' Peyton Manning passes physical to draw \$40 million guarantee

By Mike Klis  
The Denver Post  
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First things first as the Broncos embark on free agency: Peyton Manning will be their quarterback for the next two years.

Manning recently passed his physical exam, assuring his place on the Broncos' 2013 roster as the NFL officially opened for business at 2 p.m. Tuesday.

His place on the Broncos' 2013 roster in turn triggers guarantees in his salaries over the next two years.

As part of the five-year contract Manning signed with the Broncos at about this time last year, he will draw a \$20 million salary in 2013 and another \$20 million in 2014.

Has there been a physical exam worth \$40 million?

Manning, who turns 37 in 12 days, made \$18 million in his first year with the club. And a case can be made that he earned every penny, throwing for 37 touchdowns against 11 interceptions while leading the Broncos to a 13-3 record, AFC West title and a No. 1 playoff seed in the playoffs.

He was named NFL comeback player of the year as he had missed the previous season, his final year with the Indianapolis Colts, to recover from four neck surgeries.

The final two years in Manning's contract — \$19 million in 2015 and \$19 million in 2016 — are not guaranteed.



# Front Office Power Rankings: The NFL's best decision-makers

Don Banks

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Perhaps it has gone a tad underappreciated, but the sea change in NFL front offices the past two years has been almost staggering. Veteran personnel decision-makers like Bill Polian, Jerry Angelo, Al Davis, A.J. Smith, Marty Hurney, Scott Pioli, Mike Tannenbaum and Billy Devaney are no longer running teams, while fresh faces like Chicago's Phil Emery, Indianapolis' Ryan Grigson, St. Louis' Les Snead, Oakland's Reggie McKenzie, Jacksonville's David Caldwell, Kansas City's John Dorsey, Tennessee's Ruston Webster, the Jets' John Idzik, San Diego's Tom Telesco, Carolina's David Gettleman, and Arizona's Steve Kiem are getting their first opportunities as general managers.

Like never before, it's a new day in the NFL in terms of a new breed of club executives. All told, 15 of the league's 32 teams have undergone some sort of significant change in the front office flow chart just since the close of the 2011 season, and two other teams (Miami and Tampa Bay) fired head coaches but retained their GMs during that span, at least altering the top-level decision-making tandem that had been in place.

With so much rampant turnover, continuity is in short supply and roughly half the league's front offices are in the formative stages of compiling their track record of results. But that didn't stop us from attempting to power rank the 12 best front offices as free agency opens and the personnel acquisition season begins in earnest.

With so many new GM/head coaching combinations in place, identifying the most successful (and thus, stable) front offices is fairly straightforward, via the process of elimination. There are owners such as Jerry Jones and Mike Brown, who act as their own GMs in Dallas and Cincinnati, respectively, but other than those exceptions, the list of men who are long-time veterans at calling the personnel shots for their clubs is down to New England coach Bill Belichick and Baltimore GM Ozzie Newsome, with Pittsburgh's well-respected general manager Kevin Colbert being part of the collaborative decision-making process the Steelers are known for, and New Orleans GM Mickey Loomis sharing authority with head coach Sean Payton.

For the purposes of our NFL front office power rankings, we communicated with current club executives and veteran agents to get a cross section of opinion on the personnel work of those currently in power. Here's my take on the 12 best in the business, with assorted observations and insight:

## **12. New Orleans**

I can make two very divergent cases when it comes to the Saints. First, there's the big picture view: Compare where the club is today compared to pre-2006, when GM Mickey Loomis and head coach Sean Payton first joined forces. There is no comparison. The franchise has enjoyed a playoff-run glory era, and won its first Super Bowl title, after the 2009 season. During that time, the Saints on the personnel front have been superb at discovering unsung talents like Marques Colston (seventh round) and Pierre Thomas (undrafted), and made their share of smart free-agent signings (see Drew Brees and Darren Sproles).

But there is another side to the story. They can't seem to fix their historically bad defense, first-round draft choices like Sedrick Ellis (2008), Patrick Robinson (2010) and Mark Ingram (2011) have lacked impact-player production, and the bottom line is that New Orleans has underachieved since winning the Super Bowl, with just one playoff victory in the past three seasons despite owning one of the game's three best quarterbacks. And then there's the whole bounty scandal, with both Loomis and Payton receiving league suspensions in 2012, which at least has to be accounted for in some respect. On balance, the Saints are a top 12 front office, but just barely, and teams like Cincinnati, Minnesota and St. Louis have done better work more recently.

## **11. Denver**

The Broncos probably deserve inclusion on this list for last offseason's stellar quarterback work alone. Denver football czar John Elway was smart enough -- and tough-skinned enough -- to realize he had a wildly popular but limited starter in Tim Tebow, and he dared to set about upgrading the position in the face of a potential fan revolt. Actually, once the Broncos let it be known they were all-in on the Peyton Manning sweepstakes, most Denver fans forgot they ever knew what a Tebow was. And as it turns out, what a masterstroke it was, with Elway and the Broncos hitting all the right buttons in their smart and aggressive pursuit of No. 18.

As for the rest of the roster, it's a bit early to judge Elway's and head coach John Fox's track record. Sure, the Von Miller pick (No. 2 in 2011) was a beauty, but it was also a no-brainer. Miller had can't-miss written on his forehead. Two playoff trips in two years together speak volumes, but Elway and Fox didn't pick Ryan Clady, Elvis Dumervil, Demaryius Thomas or Eric Decker, or trade for Champ Bailey way back when. Those talents all came to Denver in the Josh McDaniels or Mike

Shanahan eras. Elway and Co. are off to a strong start, and arguably Manning makes Super Bowl dreams possible, but most of the pieces were already in place. That can't be held against them, but it also should be mentioned as part of equation in the Mile High City.

## **10. Houston**

After perennially playing the role of the NFL's biggest tease for a number of years, the Texans have established themselves as an upper tier franchise in the past two seasons, winning 22 regular season games and two more in the playoffs. And the front office headed by GM Rick Smith has had plenty to do with that ascension, drafting shrewdly, finding overlooked talent like running back Arian Foster in the collegiate free agent pool, and making the 2007 trade for quarterback Matt Schaub that helped set up the franchise's current playoff run.

Give the Texans high marks for knowing who they are and what they're after. Like most successful teams, they draft players that fit what they do, be it their 3-4 defense or their zone running scheme and blocking style. The draft has brought talents like J.J. Watt, Brooks Reed, Brian Cushing and Connor Barwin in recent years -- not to mention rookie quarterback T.J. Yates, who kept the team's 2011 playoff drive alive when Schaub and backup Matt Leinart went down -- and Smith has been unafraid to let stars like Mario Williams and DeMeco Ryans go once their value in the Texans' system peaked. Houston still doesn't have enough on offense to unseat the top powers in the AFC, but the Texans are built smartly and for the long haul, and their window should not close any time soon

## **9. Pittsburgh**

As rules go, this one is easy to follow: Any franchise that has not endured consecutive playoff-less seasons since 1999-2000 deserves automatic inclusion among the top 12 best front office operations in the league. That's the neighborhood the Steelers have lived in the dozen years from 2001-2012 -- with five AFC title game trips and three Super Bowl berths in that span -- and that's why they start every season as a threat to win it all. Good coaching and a consistent approach by GM Kevin Colbert to the franchise's personnel philosophy are the hallmarks of the Steelers.

That said, the switch from Bruce Arians to Todd Haley at offensive coordinator didn't exactly pan out in 2012, and Pittsburgh seems to annually have salary cap issues that require contract restructuring and the eventual loss of some talented players. This year's expected departure of receiver Mike Wallace and the cap release of outside linebacker James Harrison are just two of the latest examples. Some within the league believe this will eventually catch up to Pittsburgh, and that a serious downturn is nearly inevitable. You can't re-do deals forever. Eventually

the piper must be paid. Age and a salary squeeze might be closing in on the Steelers.

## **8. Indianapolis**

There are those who believe the Colts have a lucky horseshoe lodged up their you-know-what. Need a quarterback? Well, you just take your medicine for a year and then go out and select a Peyton Manning or an Andrew Luck. That's how that works. At least in Indy. Granted, Luck was a bit of fortuity. But he wasn't the only piece the Colts and rookie general manager Grigson got right in 2012. Grigson's first draft was a grand slam on offense, with six legitimate contributors, including Luck, tight ends Dwayne Allen and Coby Fleener, receivers T.Y. Hilton and LaVon Brazill and running back Vick Ballard.

After making the playoffs 11 times in the 14-season Bill Polian-Peyton Manning era, the Colts may keep the good times rolling for years to come with the Grigson-Luck tandem. Maybe the tougher schedule gets Indy in 2013, or maybe the Colts won't have the same Chuck Pagano-inspired motivation to draw on next season. But last year's 11-5 finish after the 2-14 debacle of 2011 was the story of the year in the NFL, and it wasn't so much a turnaround as it was the resumption of the natural order of things in Indianapolis. Somebody's doing something very right in the front office.

## **7. San Francisco**

It's hard to overestimate the instant impact of the two-year Jim Harbaugh coaching era in San Francisco, but the reality is he has brought forth production from a cupboard that was pretty well-stocked when he got there. The 49ers have an embarrassment of riches in some ways -- there were 15 former first-round picks on the 2012 roster, with nine of those first-rounders being homegrown. General manager Trent Baalke, who worked in the team's personnel department from 2008-2010, deserves plenty of credit, but so too does former 49ers GM Scot McCloughan, who was fired in March 2010.

Eleven of San Francisco's 22 starters last season were acquired when McCloughan ran the front office, including Pro Bowl picks Patrick Willis, Frank Gore, Dashon Goldson, Joe Staley and Justin Smith. So too were Vernon Davis, Alex Smith and Michael Crabtree. Baalke's 2011 draft class has its own cache, as does his 2011 free-agent signings of Carlos Rogers, Donte Whitner and David Akers. In summary, a ton of talent has been amassed in San Francisco, but it only started bearing real fruit once Harbaugh and Baalke assumed power in early 2011. After years of losing and directionless drift, the 49ers are again winning big.

## **6. Atlanta**

There are plenty of things that command admiration and respect about the first-class program Falcons general manager Thomas Dimitroff and head coach Mike Smith have built in their five years on the job: There's the way they work so seamlessly together; the risks they're willing to take to improve (see Julio Jones draft-day trade in 2011), and Atlanta's unprecedented era of success from 2008 on -- a 56-24 regular-season record and four playoff trips in five years. For a franchise that had never even had consecutive winning seasons before these guys arrived, these are the salad days in Atlanta.

Peria Jerry in 2009 aside, Atlanta has drafted pretty well and had more hits than misses via trades (Tony Gonzalez and Asante Samuel) or free agency (Matt Bryant and Michael Turner good; Ray Edwards and Dunta Robinson not so much). It also speaks volumes that teams keep raiding the Falcons front office for a new GM of their own (David Caldwell in Jacksonville and Les Snead in St. Louis the past two years). But, and there's always a but with the Falcons, playoff success has to have some role in the equation, and that's where I can't quite make the case for Atlanta cracking the top five just yet. The Falcons are just 1-4 in the postseason, and they came darn close to blowing even that victory in last season's divisional round at home against Seattle. Get that fixed and there'll be nothing left not to like.

## **5. Seattle**

As I wrote of the Seahawks in critiquing their bold trade for Vikings receiver-return man Percy Harvin on Monday, they are not afraid to swim against the tide in making personnel decisions, be it selecting first-round picks like Bruce Irvin and James Carpenter higher than most had them rated, or investing in a third-round quarterback from Wisconsin (Russell Wilson) despite his less-than-prototypical size. Seattle has a little moxie and method to its madness, and it has generated a lot of respect from fellow NFL front offices in the past year, with the deal for Harvin being another potentially beneficial move for a club that has the courage of its convictions.

As one rival personnel executive told me, the Seahawks have "forged a new identity for themselves," and are willing to target the kind of player they want, even if he doesn't carry a consensus grade or he represents out-of-the-mainstream thinking. General manager John Schneider and head coach Pete Carroll have been good together in their three years, and they have two playoff berths and two postseason victories to show for it. Seattle still has eight draft picks remaining in this year's lottery, plus some cap room to maneuver in free agency. The Seahawks are in great position to challenge San Francisco in the division and for conference supremacy, and this is a rivalry that should only grow and intensify in coming years.

## **4. New England**

Bill Belichick's recent acquisition record has been well-criticized by many, and deservedly so when it comes to New England's issues in the secondary (see Darius Butler, Terrence Wheatley, Ras-I Dowling, Brandon Meriweather, etc...). But other than the shortcomings in the defensive backfield, the infusion of talent has not been insignificant. Chandler Jones and Dont'a Hightower upgraded the defensive front seven last year, and picks like Nate Solder, Shane Vereen, Stevan Ridley, Devin McCourty, Rob Gronkowski, Aaron Hernandez and Jerod Mayo have paid varying returns on their investment.

True, the Chad Ochocinco and Albert Haynesworth trades were absolute bombs, and Brandon Lloyd's signing didn't herald in a new era of dominance in Foxboro. But Belichick doesn't only swing and miss. The Aqib Talib deal worked out nicely last season, and somebody found that play-making machine and Mike Vrabel clone Rob Ninkovich as a free agent in 2009. If the Pats can keep Wes Welker on board during free agency and find a deep-threat receiver for quarterback Tom Brady, the Patriots will crank out another 11 to 13 wins in monotonous fashion and prop that Super Bowl window of opportunity wide open for at least 2013.

### **3. New York Giants**

This is a pretty vital offseason in New York because the Giants have defensive issues to shore up, and they didn't even get their trademark pass rush last season, instead surrendering the second most yards in the NFL (a franchise-record 6,134). But what you have to love about the personnel operation that GM Jerry Reese heads up is that it is not one based on panic moves or over-reaction. New York is the only team in the NFL to win multiple Super Bowl titles in the past six years, in part because Reese and Tom Coughlin make sound decisions. They're content to let Philadelphia or Washington win the free agency season, as long as their Giants win the NFC East.

New York has proven it can find players in any round of the draft, or after it, and not just near the top, where most of the best players can be located. Ahmad Bradshaw was a seventh-rounder in 2007, and Victor Cruz wasn't even selected in 2010. And as they have shown on numerous occasions, they won't stretch to keep a veteran if they think they have a youthful upgrade ready to take over (Bradshaw out, David Wilson in). The old-school Giants take the long-term view better than most front offices, and with three playoffs trips and a pair of Super Bowl rings in the Reese era, they get their fair share of short-term results as well.

### **2. Green Bay**

The Packers almost always reside near the top of the list when it comes to the reputation of their front office, because they have the talented roster, draft track record, organizational stability and aversion to quick fixes in free agency that have

almost always worked for the league's best and brightest teams. There's a good reason Oakland came after Reggie McKenzie as its GM last year, and John Dorsey was Kansas City's choice to lead the franchise as general manager this year. The tough-minded Packers are seen as having the right approach to building an organization and the kind of commitment to the draft that pays dividends.

Thompson is a scout at heart, and he loves nothing more than to watch tape and do his homework, where others GMs might get caught up in the high profile nature and glamor of the job. Green Bay hasn't followed up with the multiple Super Bowl titles that some predicted in the aftermath of its 2010 victory, but its roster is still the envy of most teams, and the Packers aren't going away any time soon. Green Bay has missed the playoffs just once in the past six seasons, and its window will stay open as long as quarterback Aaron Rodgers stays upright.

## **1. Baltimore**

This isn't just a case of to the winners go the spoils. Only the newly minted Super Bowl champion Ravens have gone to the playoffs in each of the past five seasons, and Baltimore has even won at least one postseason game every year during that span. Simply put, the front office that Ozzie Newsome has led since the franchise relocated from Baltimore in 1996 has been a blueprint for success over most of that span. The Ravens won with defense in 2000 and for many years after that, and now they're winning with offense, with Super Bowl MVP quarterback Joe Flacco taking on the reins of leadership as Ray Lewis exits stage left. That's the kind of versatility and adaptability every franchise covets for its roster.

As we just learned again Monday, the Ravens don't get overly sentimental about their weighty personnel decisions. They traded playoff-run star Anquan Boldin when he wouldn't play ball with them on the salary cap, and they might watch starters like Ed Reed, Dannell Ellerbe, Paul Kruger and Bryant McKinnie follow him out the door. But Baltimore has lost quality players before and prospered (guard Ben Grubbs and outside linebacker Jarret Johnson in free agency just last year) and they won't sentence themselves to salary cap hell in order to avoid it. They had to get Flacco re-signed without franchising him this offseason, and they did. Everything after that fell under the heading of optional move. With another Lombardi in the trophy case, Newsome can afford to be more patient than ever. His legacy secure, his eventual replacement already on hand in the highly regarded Eric DeCosta, the team's assistant GM, Newsome can focus on keeping the NFL's best personnel department on task and running smoothly.

## **The Also-Ran Department**

- **Teams that no longer deserve their bad reputation** -- Cincinnati in the AFC; and Washington in the NFC. Both the Bengals and Redskins, after being

laughingstocks on the personnel front for so long, have done a pretty good job with their rosters of late. The Redskins no longer crash and burn after trying to win free agency every year, and the Bengals don't take every character-risk player or off-field baggage case who shows up on their draft board. Kudos to Marvin Lewis and Mike Brown in Cincinnati, and Mike Shanahan and Bruce Allen in Washington.

The Bengals obviously pulled off one of the great heists in recent memory in trading Carson Palmer to Oakland, but it was the Raiders in their brief and eventful Hue Jackson era, without Al Davis around to call the shots. But even without that move, Cincinnati has drafted boldly and well recently, and two consecutive playoff trips -- and three in four years -- has raised the bar of expectation for the Bengals.

As for the Redskins, their Robert Griffin III blockbuster deal with St. Louis last March might have changed the course of an entire franchise. If he's healthy and back to being himself in 2013, and Washington builds on its surprise NFC East title of 2012, the perception of the Redskins on the personnel front will be dramatically better than it was from 2000-2011 of the Daniel Snyder era.

- **The team that makes you scratch your head** -- Detroit has way too many players that have had character issues or injury concerns, and you wonder when the Lions will learn. Detroit general manager Martin Mayhew and head coach Jim Schwartz have taken chances on the likes of Jahvid Best and Louis Delmas, even though both failed some team physicals coming out of the draft. Neither have been able to stay healthy in the NFL.

Same story for Titus Young and Nick Fairley on the red-flag character-issue front. Young is already an ex-Lion because of his knuckleheaded ways, and Fairley has posed his challenges in that department as well, becoming one of the several Lions players arrested last offseason (more than once). Maybe it's the Curse of Matt Millen still coming back to bite Detroit, but many of the Lions' personnel problems seem self-created.

- **The team that reverses field between making sense, and not making sense** -- Would I surprise you if I had the New York Jets locked and loaded for this maddening designation? I thought not. The Jets in the Mike Tannenbaum-Rex Ryan era had their share of draft successes, but then they invariably would out-think themselves and bring in a Santonio Holmes, Plaxico Burress or Tim Tebow to complicate matters, both in the locker room and on the field. Questionable moves at questionable times were kind of what started to define the Jets in the past couple of underachieving years, after the success of consecutive AFC title game trips in 2009-2010.



You pick the description, I've heard them all: Piecemeal. No rhyme or reason. The grab-bag approach. No matter what you call it, the results are the same. The blueprint in New York, if there ever really was one, became impossible to read.

- **The budget-conscious Bucs** -- Reality or fiction, the perception within the league is that the Bucs have a quality young general manager in Mark Dominik, and a solid head coach in Greg Schiano, but they're limiting them both by trying to win on the cheap. Tampa Bay does a pretty respectable job in the draft, and they're seen as a franchise headed in the right direction. But the league also implemented new rules a few years back to make teams use a good bit of their salary cap, in part with light-spending Tampa Bay in mind.

The culprit, as many see it, is the Glazer family, which owns the Bucs in addition to their other professional sports holding, the legendary Manchester United soccer team in England. The question you hear around the league is whether Tampa Bay is committed to winning at the same level as most of their NFL opponents?

# Schefter: Denver near Knighton signing

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 12, 2013

ESPN's Adam Schefter is reporting that the Broncos are close to signing defensive tackle Terrance Knighton. He'd reunite with Denver defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio, who was his head coach with the Jaguars.

Knighton is a strong run-stuffer and would fit well with Kevin Vickerson, who was re-signed Tuesday. If the Broncos do sign Knighton, they might look to fill other needs with the No. 28 pick in the draft.

Meanwhile, the Denver Post reported that the Broncos have interest in Detroit safety Louis Delmas, who was visiting the Rams.

# What stands out thus far in free agency

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 12, 2013

A look at some of the storylines that stood out most in the first day of free agency Tuesday:

**Where's the defense in Oakland?** As of now, the Oakland Raiders have just three set starters on defense -- lineman Lamarr Houston, linebacker Miles Burris and safety Tyvon Branch. That's scary. Yes, Oakland will add players and will field a defense, but that fact shows you how much work needs to be done.

**Where's the offensive line in San Diego?** The San Diego Chargers' offensive line is in just as bad a shape as Oakland's defense. The team's best offensive lineman, guard Louis Vasquez, defected to the Denver Broncos on Tuesday. The Chargers might need to find starters everywhere on the line but center. They have to get to work, although new signee King Dunlap could be in the mix somewhere.

**Another "dream team" for Reid?** The Chiefs have been wildly busy all offseason. Some detractors are saying new Kansas City coach Andy Reid is taking the same "dream team" approach his Eagles took two years ago when they stockpiled many big-name free agents. It didn't work. This is a much different approach. The Chiefs had to keep their top free agents, had to get a quarterback in Alex Smith and have added some key rotational players in free agency. There isn't a ton of flash here. A solid roster is being built.

**Vasquez's signing is big for Denver:** Thus far, the Vasquez signing in Denver was the best work we've seen in the AFC West since the opening of free agency. He toughens the offensive line in Denver and makes it better. Vasquez and tackle Orlando Franklin on the right side are going to be a load in the running game. Plus, the signing hurt a division rival. Very solid move.

**Lack of first-round impact hurts Oakland:** The Raiders cut a pair of former first-round picks, safety Michael Huff (2006) and receiver Darrius Heyward-Bey (2009), on Tuesday; linebacker Rolando McClain (2010) is expected to be cut soon. That would leave just running back Darren McFadden (2008) and kicker Sebastian Janikowski (2000) as the only Raiders first-round picks on the roster. That is not the way to build a team. The Raiders have the No. 3 pick in April's draft. They must get this one correct. Right now, I'd say the top options there are either Florida defensive tackle Sharrif Floyd or Alabama cornerback Dee Milliner.

# Broncos get Louis Vasquez from Chargers

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 12, 2013

We have our first big AFC West news Tuesday with guard Louis Vasquez going from San Diego to Denver in NFL free agency.

This is a move that strengthens the best team in the division and hurts the Chargers.

Vasquez is considered a tough, hard-nosed player and a solid pro. He signed for four years with a deal worth nearly \$6 million a year. I would think this means the end of the Chris Kuper era in Denver. Kuper has been dealing with injuries, and there had been talk that Orlando Franklin would move from right tackle to guard.

Now, I'd expect Vasquez and Franklin to combine to be one of the better run-blocking right sides of a line. Both are big road graders.

I know the Chargers want to get more athletic on the offensive line, and they didn't have much contact with Vasquez. But the truth is, he was their best offensive lineman, and the Chargers now may have as many as four holes on the O-line. This is a position group that has to be addressed soon.

In other AFC West news:

U-T San Diego is reporting the Chargers signed Dallas tight end John Phillips, who will likely play in a backup role. He has 30 catches in three NFL seasons.

The Alex Smith trade to Kansas City from San Francisco, as expected, became official.

The Chargers claimed running back Fozzy Whittaker, who was cut by the Cardinals on Monday. He was with new San Diego offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt in Arizona. But Whittaker will have to prove he deserves a spot on San Diego's roster.

As expected, the Chargers cut defensive tackle Antonio Garay. The move saves them \$5 million.

ESPN NFL Insider Adam Schefter reports Kansas City defensive end Glenn Dorsey will visit the 49ers.

# Report: Broncos prep for post-Dumervil era

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 12, 2013

The Denver Post reports the Broncos likely won't cut pass-rusher Elvis Dumervil until a replacement is secured. And many are considering former Indianapolis Colts pass-rusher Dwight Freeney as the top candidate to replace Dumervil.

The newspaper also reports the Broncos are interested in Eagles cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie.

In other AFC West notes:

Raiders tight end Brandon Myers continues to be connected to reports he'll end up in Cleveland. It's obvious Oakland could have a tough time keeping him.

CBS Sports is reporting defensive end Chris Canty is visiting the Ravens. He visited the Chiefs a couple of weeks ago.

# AFC West notes

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 12, 2013

ESPN's Adam Schefter is reporting the Broncos have re-signed defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson. He is a solid player. The team is still interested in Jacksonville's Terrance Knighton. The Denver Post reports the Broncos and pass-rusher Elvis Dumervil are still far apart, even though Dumervil is open to a pay cut.

Schefter reported Denver could make a run at Shaun Phillips of the Charges if Dumervil is cut. Dwight Freeney is in play as well.

The Chiefs still have interest in Miami cornerback Sean Smith.

The Kansas City Star is reporting the Chiefs are trying to trade quarterback Matt Cassel. There would be a few teams interested in him on the market. Maybe the Chiefs can get a late-round pick. If not, expect him to be cut soon.

Kansas City running back Peyton Hillis is visiting Green Bay.

Defensive end Chris Canty signed with the Ravens. He visited the Chiefs several weeks ago.

San Diego cornerback Antoine Cason's market may be heating up. He's still a long shot to return to the Chargers.

UT-San Diego reports the Chargers are still interested in former Kansas City right tackle Eric Winston. He visited the Chargers a few days ago. The team signed King Dunlap on Tuesday, but he may be viewed as a player who gives the team depth.

There have been some conflicting reports on Oakland's salary cap situation. ESPN's John Clayton is reporting the Raiders are \$14.66 million under the cap. They can make some more cuts to increase that number.

Sports Illustrated reports Oakland running back Mike Goodson is getting interest from the Jets, Bengals and Cowboys.

# Denver Broncos shore up offensive line, grab guard Louis Vasquez

By Frank Schwab  
Yahoo! Sports  
March 12, 2013

The Denver Broncos' championship window will be open as long as Peyton Manning is the same Peyton Manning we saw last season. The best way to squeeze a few extra years out of the franchise quarterback is to protect him well, and the Broncos have invested heavily in their offensive line to do just that.

Denver, which already franchise tagged left tackle Ryan Clady this offseason, signed guard Louis Vasquez, a very good player who did not come cheap.

Vasquez's deal is worth \$23.5 million over four years with \$13 million guaranteed, according to USA Today. That's a lot of money for a team with other needs, particularly in the secondary, but supplying Manning with an elite supporting cast is Denver's biggest priority.

Vasquez started 54 games for the Chargers over his first four NFL seasons, allowing just 11 sacks with one penalty, according to STATS, Inc. At 335 pounds, he also adds power to a running game that had some good moments last season but could stand some improvement. The move also takes a bite out of division rival San Diego.

The Broncos might move on from former starting right guard Chris Kuper, a solid player who started just five games last season because of injuries. With Vasquez and Orlando Franklin on the right side, the Broncos have a massive line that should open up holes in the running game. That should take some pressure off Manning, and hopefully the expensive line Denver has will keep the quarterback off his back too.



# Peyton Manning now due \$40 million

Eddie Pells

Associated Press

March 12, 2013

DENVER -- Peyton Manning knows where his paycheck is coming from and the Denver Broncos know who their quarterback will be for the next two years.

The four-time NFL Most Valuable Player was on Denver's roster Tuesday, the start of the new league year, triggering his guaranteed salary of \$20 million a year for 2013 and 2014.

Manning, who turns 37 on March 24, had passed a physical earlier in the offseason, so it was no surprise to see his name on the roster when the league year and free agency officially began Tuesday afternoon.

Because Manning's health was questionable as he entered free agency last year after multiple neck operations, the Broncos signed him to a contract that did not include a signing bonus. It went counter to the structure of most NFL contracts and gave the Broncos a chance to bail without huge financial damage if Manning wasn't effective after the surgery.

In turn, Manning got two years guaranteed if he made it into the second season. The last two years of the deal -- 2015 and 2016 -- are worth \$19 million each and are not guaranteed.

In his first year with the Broncos, Manning made \$18 million. He threw for 4,659 yards and 37 touchdowns and was named NFL Comeback Player of the Year.

Also on Tuesday, the Broncos agreed to terms with free-agent offensive lineman Louis Vasquez on a four-year contract worth \$23.4 million, with \$13 million of that guaranteed.

Vasquez, a third-round pick in the 2009 draft, started all 54 games he played for the San Diego Chargers over his first four seasons.

The signing could mean the end in Denver for right guard Chris Kuper, a 2006 fifth-round draft pick who has had two recent ankle surgeries and started only five games last season.

Denver also brought defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson back, agreeing to terms on a two-year contract with the ninth-year veteran, who started 14 games last season and helped anchor the Broncos' second-ranked run defense.

# Louis Vasquez signs with Denver Broncos

SportsIllustrated.com

March 12, 2013

The San Diego Chargers' loss turned out to be the Denver Broncos' gain. Denver agreed to deal with ex-Chargers guard Louis Vasquez on what's believed to be a four-year, \$23.5 million deal with \$13 million guaranteed.

Vasquez graded out as the Chargers' best offensive player on Pro Football Focus for the 2012 season, and the site had him as the league's 13th-best guard — only four spots back of Andy Levitre, who received about \$8 million per season on a multi-year deal with the Titans.

The Broncos struggled on the interior line last year, with Manny Ramirez allowing six sacks after replacing an injured Chris Kuper. The 30-year-old Kuper has had two major leg injuries over the past two years, so it's hard to know if the Broncos can or will count on him at all.

Vasquez's signing seems to indicate that Kuper's days in Denver are numbered. If Vasquez plays as he's capable, though, the Broncos hardly will miss him.

**Grade: B-plus.** Very solid pickup for a team with Super Bowl aspirations.

# Elvis Dumervil willing to take pay cut from Denver Broncos

NFL.com

March 12, 2013

It was only a week ago that Elvis Dumervil was willing to restructure his contract with the Denver Broncos but unwilling to take a pay cut.

Now that free agency has begun in the NFL, Dumervil has changed his tune.

NFL.com's Ian Rapoport reported Tuesday, citing a source, that Dumervil is willing to take a pay cut to remain a Bronco. Dumervil's team has exchanged a proposal with the Broncos but has not heard back.

The defensive end, a three-time Pro Bowl selection, is guaranteed \$12 million if he's on the roster March 16 and the team wants that number lowered.

Free-agent pass-rusher Dwight Freeney is considered the Broncos' backup plan if they are unable to work out an agreement with Dumervil, according to Rapoport.

# Free agency: Dolphins, Broncos, Browns, Titans all early winners

NFL.com

March 12, 2013

Another year, another free agency frenzy. The new league year officially began Tuesday and we immediately experienced a flurry of activity, including a dash of marquee signings (headlined by Mike Wallace and Dannell Ellerbe going to the Miami Dolphins), a touch of headline-grabbing releases (Ryan Fitzpatrick cut by the Buffalo Bills; Nnamdi Asomugha dropped by the Philadelphia Eagles) and a healthy pinch of general roster reconstruction.

Take a deep breath and ponder one simple question: Who made the best move right out the gate?

**Daniel Jeremiah NFL.com**

## **Broncos' key acquisition helps Peyton, hurts division rival**

I like the move by the Denver Broncos to bring in offensive guard Louis Vasquez from the San Diego Chargers. He is a big, powerful blocker who can help keep Peyton Manning upright.

This is not only a big addition for the Broncos, it's a big loss for the Chargers. Offensive line is an area of need this offseason for the Bolts, who must do a better job of protecting Philip Rivers in 2013. Unfortunately, they just lost one of the few stalwarts from last year.

**Bucky Brooks NFL.com**

## **Titans make moves to improve offense**

I love the Tennessee Titans' moves at the start of free agency.

Andy Levitre solves their biggest issue on the offensive line. He is a rugged player in the middle, and his presence will help Chris Johnson get back on track. Delanie Walker gives the Titans a dynamic tight end to replace Jared Cook in the passing game. He also is a significant upgrade as a blocker.

Mike Munchak wants to alleviate the pressure on Jake Locker by relying on the ground game. The moves today will certainly help the Titans follow that through on that premise.

## **Adam Rank NFL.com**

### **Dolphins create the biggest splash with a pair of high-profile signings**

The Miami Dolphins came out of the gate flying on Tuesday. Of course, the signing of Mike Wallace was of little surprise, and it's surely the move most Dolphins fans are talking about on Tuesday evening. But the key move just might have been the acquisition of inside linebacker Dannell Ellerbe.

The Baltimore Ravens didn't flinch when Paul Kruger left for the division-rival Cleveland Browns, but the defending Super Bowl champs wanted to keep Ellerbe around. The Ravens will enter next season without Ray Lewis, Kruger and Ellerbe.

## **Gregg Rosenthal NFL.com**

### **The best move came weeks ago, courtesy of the 49ers**

The best move was made weeks ago, and officially announced on Tuesday. The San Francisco 49ers built up a broken-down quarterback in Alex Smith, benched him and traded him for a high second-round pick in 2013 and a conditional mid-round pick in 2014.

Oh, and they cleared a ton of money along the way.

## **Adam Schein NFL Network**

### **Jake Locker: You're officially on the clock**

I absolutely love what the Titans are doing. As I wrote Monday, Levitre to Tennessee made sense. There was a reason Chris Johnson bashed the Titans offensive line on our SiriusXM radio show. Levitre is a great, reliable guard who helps both Johnson and Jake Locker. And playing for coach Mike Munchak, a former all-pro lineman, makes it better.

Plus, I have thought Delanie Walker was underrated for years. Away from Vernon Davis' shadow, he will thrive.

Jake Locker is officially on the clock. And the Titans, who have three talented receivers, were smart to help him out.

## **Jason Smith NFL.com**

### **New Browns regime immediately makes its mark with Kruger coup**

Call me crazy, but I like the Cleveland Browns getting Paul Kruger right out of the gate. Did they overpay? Of course they did, but you have to when you're the

Browns. They're trying to create a winning atmosphere while at the same time convincing free agents that Cleveland can be a "destination." This helps with both of those things.

A close second place is the Buffalo Bills cutting Ryan Fitzpatrick (with an assist from Deadspin.com). If a player isn't going to be a part of your team going forward, make that decision as soon as possible. Don't postpone the future. The Bills made the right call. Now I look forward to that Tarvaris Jackson/Ryan Nassib QB derby.

### **Charley Casserly NFL.com**

#### **Still buzzing from Seahawks' blockbuster trade for Harvin (which does carry a risk)**

The best move, to me, comes with a risk: Percy Harvin to the Seattle Seahawks. The risk is Harvin's past issues, including his health. On the positive side, he is a true game changer as a returner and receiver. Not to mention, he's just entering his prime.

The Seahawks lacked a deep-threat receiver on offense last season. Now they have one.

### **Elliot Harrison NFL.com**

#### **Return of CJ2K? Titans make it possible by signing Levitre**

I like the Titans signing Andy Levitre. This team sorely needed help at guard. If you watched the Titans play last season, you saw Chris Johnson hitting a wall in the middle of the line over and over again. The interior of Tennessee's line had to be addressed.

Getting an overachiever like Levitre is one of those under-the-radar moves that often pays off. Did Tennessee overpay? Perhaps. But when your best player can run in between the tackles, and you have the money, it behooves you to take a swing. That's what the organization did Tuesday.

# Chargers lose Vasquez to rival Broncos

By Joe Fortenbaugh  
National Football Post  
March 12, 2013

Losing one of your top offensive linemen to free agency has to sting, but losing him to a division rival makes for the type of situation that could lead to more than a few sleepless nights.

That's the predicament being dealt with in San Diego at the moment, as the Chargers just watched offensive guard Louis Vasquez sign with Peyton Manning and the Denver Broncos to the tune of a four-year deal worth \$23.5 million with \$13 million guaranteed.

San Diego surrendered 49 sacks in 2012 (fourth-worst in NFL), but little of that blame can be laid at Vasquez's doorstep, as the four-year veteran and 16-game-starter gave up just 2.5 sacks of his own last year.

The Chargers now have to find a way to replace yet another hole on the offensive line, while the Broncos can turn their attention to other roster concerns.

# Broncos likely to sign Mendenhall

Mike Florio

ProFootballTalk.com

March 12, 2013

We reported over the weekend, which feels like it was a year ago, that the Broncos are interested in running back Rashard Mendenhall.

Interest could soon become something more.

Per a league source, the Broncos are likely to add the former first-round pick, whose rookie contract with the Steelers officially expired earlier today.

Mendenhall suffered a torn ACL in Week 17 of the 2011 season, and he battled an Achilles injury during the 2012 season. He also had an Osama bin Laden Twitter misadventure two years ago, not to mention a decision to stay home after he was informed he'd be deactivated for a December game against the Chargers.

The Broncos don't seem to be deterred.

Also interested are the Cardinals. But the Broncos are deemed to be the favorite to land him.



# Broncos keep Vickerson

Mike Florio

ProFootballTalk.com

March 12, 2013

The Broncos are keeping one of their own.

Defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson has agreed to terms to remain with the team. The Broncos announced the move earlier tonight.

Vickerson has spent the last three seasons in Denver. He previously played for the Titans and the Dolphins.

Last year, Vickerson started 14 games — the most of his career.

# Elvis Dumervil willing to restructure, but may be cut anyway

Michael David Smith  
ProFootballTalk.com  
March 12, 2013

The Broncos and defensive end Elvis Dumervil are still talking. Whether they can come to an agreement or not remains unclear.

Dumervil, who appeared to be on the way out because the Broncos aren't willing to pay him \$12 million this season and he wasn't willing to take less, is now willing to take a pay cut, according to NFL Network's Ian Rapoport.

However, Mike Klis of the Denver Post reports that Dumervil is only offering to take less than \$12 million this season if the Broncos will make up the difference by adding guaranteed money to his salaries in 2014 and 2015. The Broncos don't appear willing to do that. And so the Broncos may still cut Dumervil before Saturday, when his \$12 million 2013 salary would become guaranteed.

The Dumervil situation could have a domino effect around the rest of the league, as Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning was getting in on the action and trying to convince his old buddy Dwight Freeney to come to Denver. Free agent defensive ends Michael Bennett, Matt Shaughnessy and Osi Umenyiora have also been mentioned as possibilities to sign with Denver in the event that Dumervil is released.

# Broncos beef up offensive line with Louis Vasquez

Michael David Smith  
ProFootballTalk.com  
March 12, 2013

The Broncos have improved their offensive line by taking a starter from an AFC West rival.

Louis Vasquez, who started all 16 games at guard for the Chargers last season, has signed a four-year, \$23.5 million contract with \$13 million fully guaranteed, according to Mike Garafolo of USA Today.

Vasquez said just before free agency began that he was planning to explore every option, and his agent noted that the Chargers had been given a chance to extend him but chose not to. Now Vasquez has discovered that the best option for him was in Denver, and the Chargers will have to fave Vasquez twice a year.

The Chargers acquired Vasquez in the third round of the 2009 NFL draft. He started 54 games in four seasons in San Diego.

On our list of the Top 100 NFL free agents, Vaquez was the second-best guard and the No. 50 player overall.

# NFL: Vasquez agrees to 4-year deal with Broncos

Staff and Wire Reports  
Corsicana Daily Sun  
March 12, 2013

— Corsicana's Louis Vasquez agreed to terms with the Denver Broncos, taking him from one AFC West rival, San Diego, to another, which also happens to be a Super Bowl contender.

Reports have Vasquez agreeing to a four-year, \$23.5 million contract. Tuesday was the first day NFL free agents could agree to terms with another NFL team.

Broncos team president John Elway tweeted Tuesday: "We've agreed to terms with guard Louis Vasquez. He is a big, powerful player who adds a physical presence to our OL."

Vasquez's agent, Rob Sheets, told the Daily Sun on Tuesday afternoon that he and Vasquez looked for three criteria for his second contract.

"Money, geography and the ability to win a ring," Sheets said. "We feel as if we accomplished all three. Louis is the 10th-highest paid guard in the NFL."

Vasquez spent his first four NFL seasons with the Chargers. A third-round pick out of Texas Tech, Vasquez started 54 games for the Chargers, missing only two games because of injuries.

USA Today's Mike Garafolo reports that \$13 million of the contract is guaranteed money.

On Pro Football Talk's Top 100 NFL free agents, Vasquez was the second-best guard and the No. 50 player overall in this free agent class.

Sheets said that he did talk to the Cowboys, who are in need of offensive line help, but that the conversation lasted about 30 seconds.

That's because the Cowboys were hit by a fine last year by the NFL, and they're limited in what they can do.

"They called to inquire like a lot of teams did. What are you hearing. Where are you at," Sheets said. "The Cowboys conversation was less than 30 seconds. I knew they weren't a player. They knew they weren't a player."

But going back to the draft the Cowboys have always been a fan of Lou. They just missed in the draft."

# Broncos Add First Free Agent

Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

March 12, 2013

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- The Broncos didn't wait long to make a splash on the first day of free agency, agreeing to terms with guard Louis Vasquez less than an hour into the new league year.

Vasquez, originally a 2009 third-round pick by the Chargers, played his first four NFL seasons in San Diego.

During that time, he committed only one penalty, which came in his rookie season. He has started all 54 games he has played and graded out as Pro Football Focus' 13th-best guard of the 2012 season.

Pro Football Focus also noted that Vasquez gave up only 22 quarterback disruptions on 584 pass blocking snaps as the Chargers' "best offensive lineman" last season.

"We've agreed to terms on a contract with guard Louis Vasquez," Executive Vice President of Football Operations John Elway announced on Twitter. "He is a big, powerful player who adds a physical presence to our OL."

Vasquez is 25 years old entering his fifth NFL season.

# Vickerson Back With Broncos

Stuart Zaas

DenverBroncos.com

March 12, 2013

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- After signing a free agent on the offensive line, the Broncos did the same to their defensive line on day one of the NFL free agency period.

The team agreed to terms on the re-signing of defensive tackle Kevin Vickerson to two-year contract, bringing back the 8th-year pro who played in all 16 games for Denver in 2012. Vickerson is the third player to sign with Denver this offseason, joining guard Louis Vasquez and safety David Bruton.

Entering his fourth season with the Broncos in 2013, Vickerson has played 36 games with 30 starts from 2010-12, totaling 86 tackles, four sacks, one interception, four pass breakups and two forced fumbles in his time with Denver.

For his career, the former seventh-round pick out of Michigan State has played 60 games and made 161 tackles, 5.5 sacks, one interception, eight pass breakups, two forced fumbles and one fumble recovery.

In 2012, he started a career-best 14 games and posted the third-highest tackle output of his career with 40 stops. His two sacks a year ago tied his career high and he appeared in all 16 games for the first time in his career. He also broke up one pass and forced one fumble, while helping anchor the middle of a Denver defense that ranked second overall and third in the NFL against the run.

Vickerson originally joined the Broncos on Sept. 7, 2010, after playing three years with the Tennessee Titans (2007-09) and two with the Miami Dolphins (2005-06). He also appeared in 10 games with NFL Europe's Cologne Centurions in 2007, where he earned All-NFL Europa honors.

With his re-signing, the Broncos now have four interior defensive linemen on the roster as he joins Mitch Unrein, Sealver Siliga and Ben Garland. The Broncos also have Derek Wolfe and Malik Jackson, who have lined up both inside and outside on the defensive line.

# Broncos Free Agent Activity

Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

March 12, 2013

On the first day of free agency, the Broncos jumped right in the fray, adding guard Louis Vasquez in a move that could have an impact across the team's offensive line.

In addition, the team has reportedly set up visits with four more free agents — cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, running back Rashard Mendenhall, defensive tackle Terrance Knighton and linebacker Stewart Bradley.

Below is a look at each one of those players. Take a look at other available free agents with the DenverBroncos.com free agency primer.

## **DOMINIQUE RODGERS-CROMARTIE**

Originally a first-round pick by the Arizona Cardinals in the 2008 NFL Draft, Rodgers-Cromartie was traded to the Philadelphia Eagles in 2011.

Including postseason, he trails only Asante Samuel, Tramon Williams and DeAngelo Hall in interceptions by cornerbacks since he was drafted.

Rodgers-Cromartie has 16 regular-season interceptions in his five seasons, four of which he has returned for touchdowns. He has also accumulated 208 tackles, 84 passes defensed, three forced fumbles, a sack and two blocked field goals.

Last season, Cromartie led the Eagles with three interceptions. The 2009 Pro Bowler turns 27 next month.

## **RASHARD MENDENHALL**

The 25-year-old Mendenhall has two 1,000-yard seasons under his belt and came just 72 yards short in a third campaign.

However, a knee injury suffered in the final game of the 2011 season limited the running back's productivity in the 2012 campaign. He was inactive for the first three games of the year before making his first start since the knee injury in Week 5. An Achilles injury held him out of four more games in the middle of the season, and by the end of the year Mendenhall had played in just six games, starting four.

For his career, the former first-round pick has 3,549 rushing yards and 29 touchdowns on the ground in five NFL seasons. He has also added 661 yards and two touchdowns through the air.



He took home a championship in Super Bowl XLIII with the Pittsburgh Steelers, coincidentally against Rodgers-Cromartie's Cardinals.

### **TERRANCE KNIGHTON**

Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio has plenty of familiarity with Knighton — a third-round pick by the Jacksonville Jaguars in 2009, when Del Rio was head coach.

Knighton all 16 games in each of his first two seasons and started 13 games in 2011. He has only missed three games due to injury in his career, which broke up his starting streak that season.

Last season, the defensive tackle played in all 16 games but started just five. Still, he ranked second on the team with 17 quarterback pressures and tied for the team lead with two forced fumbles.

The 26-year-old has racked up 259 tackles, 21 tackles for loss, 7.5 sacks, three forced fumbles, nine passes defensed and an interception in his four NFL seasons.

### **STEWART BRADLEY**

Bradley spent the past two seasons with the Arizona Cardinals, playing mostly on special teams as a backup linebacker. He played in all 16 games during both campaigns.

Prior to his stint in Arizona, he spent four seasons with the team that drafted him in the third round of the 2007 NFL Draft, the Philadelphia Eagles. He played in all 16 games as a rookie but graduated to full-time starter in 2008 when he paced the team in tackles for loss. He missed the 2009 campaign due to a knee injury that put him on injured reserve, but jumped back into a starting role in 2010 and ranked second on the team with 88 tackles.

For his career, Bradley has notched 228 tackles, three sacks, 14 passes defensed, three interceptions and a forced fumble, according to press box statistics.

# Impact of Vasquez Addition Wide-Reaching

Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 12, 2013

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- San Diego's offensive line was in disrepair last year thanks to the worst tackle play in the league, which was on full display when Broncos edge rushers Von Miller and Elvis Dumervil combined for seven sacks and five forced fumbles at Philip Rivers' expense in the teams' two 2012 games.

Louis Vasquez had nothing to do with that.

Vasquez played all 16 games for the Chargers for the first time in his four seasons there, and had his steadiest overall season -- particularly in pass protection, where he allowed just two sacks and one other quarterback hit, according to ProFootballFocus.com. The rest of the offensive line permitted 47 sacks in 2012.

The two sacks allowed is also four fewer than the Broncos' right guards (Chris Kuper and Manuel Ramirez) yielded in 2012.

Vasquez's arrival doesn't just strengthen the Broncos' offensive line, but it cripples the Chargers' unit. San Diego already had howling needs at both tackle slots, and appears to be a good bet to take one of the elite rookie tackle prospects -- Texas A&M's Luke Joeckel, Central Michigan's Eric Fisher or Oklahoma's Lane Johnson -- with its first-round pick, assuming one drops that far.

Now, Vasquez will be protecting Peyton Manning instead of Rivers. At 25, the Broncos should get the best years out of him, and can bank on full health after he missed 10 games his first three seasons.

What this means for the rest of the offensive line is unclear, but the impact could be wide-reaching.

For right tackle Orlando Franklin, it likely means he stays at right tackle instead of moving inside. There had been rumblings that he could be shifted inside, even though his 6-foot-7 frame is taller than optimal for an interior lineman (Vasquez, by comparison, is 6-foot-5).

For left guard Zane Beadles -- the only healthy member of the Broncos' final-game starting offensive line -- it means he's a good bet so remain right where he is. Beadles was the Broncos' most improved offensive lineman last year, and graded out as the 15th-best guard in the league, according to Pro Football Focus.

The impact is likely most profound for Chris Kuper, whose 2012 season was wrecked by a fractured fibula and torn ankle ligaments suffered in the 2011 regular-season finale. Kuper suffered a fractured forearm just when he was working his way back into game fitness during training camp, then suffered a high ankle sprain three games after he finally returned to the starting lineup. Further surgery in January places his future in question; he's already slated to miss the entire offseason of work as he recovers from his injuries.

Manny Ramirez, who started most of the season for Kuper, is affected as well, since this likely means he will be a backup at guard and center, behind expected starter J.D. Walton. Ramirez and Vasquez were also teammates at Texas Tech from 2005-06.

# Free Agency Outlook: Cornerback

Andrew Mason

DenverBroncos.com

March 12, 2013

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- Early in the 2012 season, the Broncos' third cornerback was Chris Harris. From Week 6 onward, it was Tony Carter for all but one game. But what the Broncos' designated No. 3 cornerbacks shared throughout the season was a heavy workload; whoever it was played 78.9 percent of the snaps throughout the year.

It owes to the style of football currently played, which forces teams into nickel and dime coverages more often than not. Realistically, the term "base defense" is passe'; if anything, the base package is a nickel formation, with the nickelback lining up opposite the slot receiver.

That's why the Broncos would be best served by examining the market, even though by the measurements of ProFootballFocus.com, they possess two of the league's top 10 cornerbacks in Harris and Champ Bailey. (Carter, who played 495 snaps mostly as the third cornerback last year, was 28th by the site's metrics.)

Since the third cornerback is a starter by all measurements of playing time, at minimum, depth is needed. Realizing this last year, the Broncos signed Tracy Porter and Drayton Florence, but neither panned out -- although Porter at least made the 53-man roster coming out of the preseason had a game-sealing pick-six in Week 1.

Bailey's future is also a reason to investigate the market. He is expected to continue playing cornerback this season, per John Fox's pronouncement at his season-ending press conference with John Elway, but as he heads into his 15th season, it's wise for the Broncos to build depth both through the draft (with 2012 fourth-round pick Omar Bolden) and free agency to ensure a smooth transition if they move Bailey to safety for the final year of his contract in 2014.

## **UNRESTRICTED FREE AGENTS:**

**Brent Grimes, Atlanta:** A bit forgotten after tearing his Achilles tendon in Week 1 last year, Grimes is effective in coverage, makes few mistakes and is a steadying influence. The only questions revolve around his health, especially given his age (he turns 30 in July), but if the Achilles has healed, he provides proven quality.

**Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, Philadelphia:** He's dangerously close to becoming a "journeyman," since he'll be on his third team since 2010, assuming the Eagles don't re-sign him. Talent has never been the problem, but all the pieces

have yet to mesh, and after five years, it's possible they never will. Nevertheless, his skill set and his still-present upside ensures that he'll start somewhere.

**Keenan Lewis, Pittsburgh:** The Steelers' roster churn helps keep the team fresh - and also ensures that they rarely overpay. Although Lewis was reasonably effective last year, it was his first full season as a starter, and it was a contract year. He'll be worth more to someone else than the Steelers, even though he might not be worth the contract he might command.

**Aqib Talib, New England:** Talent has never been the problem for Talib, but four of the last five calendar years have seen him embroiled in some kind of off-field incident, from an arrest for battery on a cab driver to a reported fight at the NFL rookie symposium in 2008 to a suspension for violation of the league's PED policy last 2012. That was the final straw for the Bucs, who dealt him to New England after the suspension, even though cornerback was the weakest spot on the roster. There are also injury concerns (a hamstring problem in 2011, a torn tendon in his hip in 2010).

**Sean Smith, Miami:** Inconsistency has dogged Smith, who followed a solid 2010 season with a bad 2011, then got off to a good start in 2012 before tailing off late. Smith's measurables are impressive, particularly his size (6-foot-3 and 215 pounds), and his potential is obvious. If a team can properly harness it, then they'll have a steal.

**Greg Toler, Arizona:** First there was a report that Toler had re-signed with the Cardinals on Tuesday, then it was retracted. A recent spate of injuries (torn ACL, pulled hamstring) is cause for concern, and he's missed 21 games the last two years and 26 of 66 total for his career, but when he's played, he's steadily improved, and had his best season last year -- when he didn't miss a tackle, according to ProFootballFocus.com. Injuries make Toler a bit of risk, but the potential for high reward is here, too.

**Derek Cox, Jacksonville:** Defensive Coordinator Jack Del Rio knows him well, and he's been a solid starter for the Jaguars. But injuries are a concern -- he's missed 17 games the last three seasons. Consistency is also an issue; ProFootballFocus.com credited him with four missed tackles in a game against Houston last year. But he intercepts passes at a healthy rate -- one every 3.9 games for his career.

**Cary Williams, Baltimore:** The expected return of Lardarius Webb from a knee injury means Williams might be expendable for the cap-challenged Ravens. Williams will make big plays -- four interceptions in 2012, and two more in the postseason -- but will give them up, too (he was credited with seven touchdowns allowed, per ProFootballFocus).

**Chris Houston, Detroit:** Houston was having a stellar season until he ran into the Falcons in Week 16 and was picked upon. But no cornerback has been more effective for the Lions the last two years than the 28-year-old Houston, and while he is likely to test the market, the Lions' defensive restoration project will absorb a setback if he doesn't return.

**Terrence Newman, Cincinnati:** He'll be 35 this year, but he remains a solid all-around cornerback, equally effective in coverage and run support. If the Bengals don't want to retain him, he won't sit on the market long, even though his contract will likely be a short-term one.

**Adam Jones, Cincinnati:** A few years ago, one would have never thought that the former "Pac-Man" would do anything quietly, but he was quietly effective for the Bengals last year. His troublesome past of drugs, arrests and pro wrestling will scare off some suitors, but if he continues to maintain the low, incident-free profile he's established recently, the 29-year-old should be effective for another two or more years.

**E.J. Biggers, Tampa Bay:** Cornerback depth was a problem for the Bucs last year after Talib's suspension and the move of Ronde Barber to safety, and Biggers was the Bucs' most effective cover corner, although at 180 pounds, he isn't strong enough to make much of a positive impact against the run. He's a solid No. 2 or No. 3 cornerback who will start somewhere.

**Quentin Jammer, San Diego:** He's been with the Chargers 11 seasons, and it seems like forever. But even lengthy stints have their end, and Jammer isn't effective in coverage anymore, having lost at least a step over the years.

**Antoine Cason, San Diego:** Struggled almost as much as Jammer did last year, but he's seven years younger, and that could mean the Chargers bring him back -- but look for additional help to bolster the position overall.

**Captain Munnerlyn, Carolina:** A solid starter, but the Broncos are already flush with smaller cornerbacks (Munnerlyn is 5-foot-8 and 190 pounds), although he's strong for his size. He's less of a ball-hawk than you'd like, with five interceptions in four seasons, but he did return three of those for touchdowns. His chances of returning to Carolina increased a bit with the release of Chris Gamble.

**Tracy Porter, Denver:** Assuming the dizziness and headaches that helped sabotage his only Broncos season don't return, he'll get another chance somewhere. In retrospect, the Broncos' one-year contract to Porter was a wise move; he moves on with little fuss, and the Broncos weren't hindered by his absence thanks to the emergence of Harris and Carter.

**Mike Jenkins, Dallas:** First-round talent hasn't yielded consistent production, and by last year, he was a backup and the subject of trade rumors at the deadline. He played through a bothersome shoulder last year, but that doesn't explain his struggles in the first three seasons of his career. He'll try to find a starting slot elsewhere in free agency, but will likely have to accept a reserve role and work his way back up.

**Others:** Michael Adams, Arizona; Will Allen, New England; Kyle Arrington, New England; Alan Ball, Houston; Zack Bowman, Chicago; Sheldon Brown, Cleveland; Darius Butler, Indianapolis, Chris Carr San Diego; Michael Coe, Dallas; Bradley Fletcher, St. Louis; Drayton Florence, Detroit; Kelvin Hayden, Chicago; Chris Johnson, Baltimore; Jacob Lacey, Detroit; Pat Lee, Detroit; Elbert Mack, New Orleans; Rashean Mathis, Jacksonville; Brice McCain, Houston; Brandon McDonald, Tampa Bay; William Middleton, Jacksonville; D.J. Moore, Chicago; Ryan Mouton, Tennessee; Chris Owens, Atlanta; Jerraud Powers, Indianapolis; Stanford Routt, Houston; Shawntae Spencer, Oakland; Marcus Trufant, Seattle; Justin Tryon, N.Y. Giants; Brian Witherspoon, N.Y. Giants.

#### **STREET FREE AGENTS:**

**DeAngelo Hall (released by Washington on March 11):** Consistency is the concern here. Although he intercepts passes often -- 13 in the last three seasons -- he also is beaten for touchdowns (16 in that same span, according to ProFootballFocus). He's durable, having missed just five games in the last eight seasons, but whoever signs him will have to live with the feast-or-famine nature of his performance.

**Chris Gamble (released by Carolina on March 8):** His agent, Carl Poston, told ESPN that Gamble will retire rather than test the free-agent market, having endured assorted injuries the last three years.

**Aaron Ross (released by Jacksonville on March 8):** A bit of a disappointment for a first-rounder (2007), he allowed opposing quarterbacks to post a 109.4 rating throwing in his direction (per ProFootballFocus) last year. He can provide some depth, but isn't an obvious upgrade.

**Other(s):** Vince Agnew, Dallas

#### **RESTRICTED FREE AGENTS:**

**Sam Shields, Green Bay:** The interest he draws on the market will depend on the Packers' tender. They would be wise to place no less than a second-round tender on Shields, who was arguably their most effective cornerback in coverage last year.

**Others:** Philip Adams, Oakland; Jonathon Amaya, Miami; Tremaine Brock, San Francisco; A.J. Jefferson, Minnesota; Bryan McCann, Miami; Cassius Vaughn, Indianapolis, R.J. Stanford, Miami.



# Lighter Short Looking to Make Impression

Gray Caldwell

DenverBroncos.com

March 12, 2013

**ENGLEWOOD, Colo.** -- After a standout career at Purdue, defensive tackle Kawann "K.K." Short was bothered by a perception that he took some plays off.

So at the Senior Bowl in Mobile, Ala., Short made sure to leave an impression.

"My whole goal going into the Senior Bowl was just being consistent," Short said. "That was one of the main things that I was focused on, and getting feedback from the NFL, and from the different coaches that – you know, my motor tends to die out. So my whole goal was to drop a little bit of weight, go into the Senior Bowl and try to be a guy that stands out."

He certainly did that.

While his stat line showed just three tackles -- one for a loss -- his impact on the game went beyond the box score. He nearly sacked Arkansas quarterback Tyler Wilson on back-to-back plays, and NFL.com analyst Daniel Jeremiah said Short "made a ton of plays."

Enough plays to earn him the title as the North team's Most Outstanding Player on defense.

While he wasn't able to build on that impression at the NFL Scouting Combine -- a hamstring injury prevented him from taking part in drills -- Short hopes his Senior Bowl production combined with his college tape will help teams realize what he can bring to the NFL.

And he will look to impress scouts even further at his Pro Day on March 25.

"Since I did the Senior Bowl, and that's the last thing they remember -- just run off that," Short said. "Try to make it even better, and come the Pro Day, I've got to do my best and try to beat some of these good times that are going to be run by these D-tackles this week (at the combine)."

Short weighed in at 299 pounds at the combine, joking that he hadn't checked in under 300 pounds since sixth grade.

He hoped that signaled to clubs that he has the work ethic to succeed at the next level. After all, he said he weighed a "sloppy" 335 pounds as a freshman at Purdue, and continued to work his way to where he is now.

"I feel more versatile," he said of weighing 299. "My conditioning is way better than it used to be. I can play a lot more, I can run a lot more, and I can hustle. So that was the main thing I was trying to do, just find a weight I was comfortable at, and keep going at that."

At Purdue, Short accumulated eye-popping stats, including 49 tackles for loss, 19.5 sacks and eight blocked kicks.

He was a first-team All-Big Ten player for his final two seasons at school, and earned second-team All-America honors in 2012.

With the draft approaching, he wants to make sure NFL teams have him high on their list in a deep defensive tackle class.

"All these guys are pretty good, so I'm just trying to go out every week and create a new name, and make sure everybody notices you," he said. "Just in the workouts, and the Pro Day and the private workouts, I've got to mentally cross these guys over to say, 'This guy is ready. We want him on our team.'"

## 2013 Free Agency Preview

Stuart Zaas  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 12, 2013

Over the past couple of weeks, DenverBroncos.com has taken a position-by-position look at the upcoming free agency period.

The new league year begins at 2 p.m. MDT today, and free agent signings will begin flooding in shortly after that time.

Denver made its first offseason move yesterday when the team re-signed safety David Bruton to a three-year contract. He was set to become an unrestricted free agent.

For answers to some frequently asked questions about free agency, [click here](#).

Here is a list of Broncos that are set to become free agents.

You can join the free-agency discussion on Twitter using [#DenFA](#).

To recap some of the top players available at each position, here are the previews from Andrew Mason:

Quarterbacks

Running Backs

Wide Receivers

Tight Ends

Offensive Linemen

Defensive Linemen

Linebackers

Cornerbacks

Safeties