

Broncos' Pat Bowlen high on off-season moves, but more work to be done

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Pat Bowlen has a way of understating what most people would call a big deal. Maybe that's the trick to owning the Broncos for going on his 30th season.

During that time, Bowlen has fired three head coaches and watched his team get creamed in three Super Bowls. He inexplicably lost a hot, young quarterback, Jay Cutler, to a personality dispute with a hotheaded young coach, Josh McDaniels. He also won back-to-back Super Bowls in the final two years of John Elway's playing career, then 13 years later hired back that Vince Lombardi Trophy-winning quarterback to lead his football operations department.

Together, Bowlen and Elway signed the most famous quarterback in free-agent history last year, Peyton Manning.

And so, while the orange and blue may have turned a couple shades of red over the Elvis Dumervil fax fiasco last week, Bowlen hardly was overwhelmed with embarrassment.

"Not really," Bowlen said Monday at the NFL meetings. "I've been around here for quite a few years. I've seen just about everything. This is not unusual."

Taking a break from a picnic-table lunch with several of his employees on a bright, warm day in the desert, Bowlen stopped for a few minutes to talk about the Broncos' offseason.

Until the Dumervil snafu, Elway was utilizing Bowlen's cash to put together a strong offseason haul that added wide receiver Wes Welker, guard Louis Vasquez, cornerback Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, defensive tackle Terrance Knighton and middle linebacker Stewart Bradley.

"John has done a great job," Bowlen said. "But, of course, we haven't played any football games yet, and that's when we'll find out."

After the big signing frenzy last week, it was revealed that contract structure was one of the Broncos' greatest recruiting tools. Namely, the Broncos lured free agents with front-loaded deals rich in cash signing bonuses.

Rodgers-Cromartie received a whopping \$4.2 million signing bonus on an otherwise underwhelming one-year, \$5 million contract. Vasquez received a \$5 million signing bonus on his four-year, \$23.5 million deal. Welker got \$4 million on his two-year, \$12 million contract. Even special-teams player David Bruton was given a \$1.2 million bonus on his \$2 million payout for 2013.

"You get what you pay for," Bowlen said. "These are football players, and we know how good they are and how good they're not. To get them, you pay them."

USA Today graded the league's 32 teams on their offseason developments Monday, and the Broncos were one of four teams to receive an A grade. Bowlen's wisdom from experience, though, doesn't allow him to get overly excited about victories in March.

Where else would Bowlen like to see his team improve?

"That's what we're trying to do right now," he said. "Ask me that question in July, when we get ready to open training camp."

Broncos are targeting a handful of players at NFL pro days, including a QB

By Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
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The NFL pro day wheels keep spinning across football nation with Air Force having been among the schools to invite the NFL's personnel evaluators to campus Monday.

But there will be some players of high interest on the field for the Broncos this week.

Tuesday, Florida State will have its pro day with many on hand to see how far quarterback E.J. Manuel can move up the NFL draft board. In a draft still searching for its No. 1 QB, Manuel has likely made the biggest move since teams really got down to the business of grinding out their grades.

Manuel was 25-6 as a starter and won four consecutive bowl games.

And Seminoles tackle Menelik Watson has likely pushed himself into the first round and would certainly be worth a long look from the Broncos. Watson, a native of Great Britain, allowed just one sack this past season.

Defensive end/tackle Cornelius "Tank" Carradine, who is recovering from ACL surgery to repair an injury he suffered late in the season against Florida, is a potential fit for the Broncos at left defensive end and could move down inside on some passing downs as well in Denver's scheme.

Cornerback Xavier Rhodes would be a fit for the Broncos as well, but he'll be long gone by the time the Broncos pick at 28th.

Wednesday, Central Florida running back Latavius Murray will work out for scouts. At 6-3 $\frac{1}{4}$, 224 pounds, Murray is one on a short list of big backs on this draft board.

Murray did not lose a fumble in his last 407 carries of his career and averaged 5.7, 5.6 and 5.6 yards per carry respectively in his final three seasons. Murray did not go to the combine, but if he runs well in this session the teams who want a little more bulk in the backfield, like the Broncos, will take notice.

Tennessee will go Wednesday as well. Plenty of folks like their wide receivers, but some teams have concerns about Cordarrelle Patterson's maturity and some off-

the-field issues so if fellow Vols wideout Justin Hunter catches the ball the way he did at the combine it could tip the scales toward him for some.

Virginia Tech linebacker Bruce Taylor is also worth a long look that day. Taylor, at 234 pounds, did not run well at the combine (5.01 in the 40-yard dash) but plays better than he times in Indianapolis. He will have to show a little more athleticism in Blacksburg, however.

Taylor also had a Lisfranc injury as a junior so carries a medical flag as well.

Thursday Georgia will have its pro day. And for a team like the Broncos who are on the hunt for linebackers, Alec Ogletree and Jarvis Jones will be of interest.

Both carry some concerns along for the ride with Jones having been diagnosed a narrowing of the spinal canal that was why USC didn't want him to play after a 2009 injury. He then transferred to Georgia and was recently given a clean bill of health by a noted orthopedist, who sent letters to every team.

Ogletree is gifted, but brings a tremendous amount of off-the-field baggage in tow, including an arrest just before the combine. Many teams didn't like his answers about some of the problems in face-to-face interviews either.

The Bulldogs massive defensive tackle John Jenkins will be of interest for the Broncos too (6-3 5/8, 346 pounds) even though they spent some money at the position in free agency with Terrance Knighton and Kevin Vickerson. Broncos defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio wants the Broncos to be big in the middle of the formation and Jenkins is one of the biggest players in the draft.

Bulldog safeties Bacarri Rambo and Shawn Williams will also get a concerted look from the Broncos too as should cornerback Sanders Commings. Commings ran a 4.41 40 at the combine after he weighed in at 216 pounds.

And on Friday Missouri Western defensive end David Bass is scheduled to work out. Bass, at 6-4, 262, had 56 tackles for loss in his career and fared well during the East-West Game practices against some of the better offensive line prospects in this draft.

Vanderbilt will also work Friday and running back Zac Stacy (216 pounds) is a player of interest. And if he isn't folks should take a look at a scoring run against Kentucky in 2011 when he carried a pile of Wildcats into the endzone with him.

Broncos see defensive end shoot to No. 1 on list of needs at NFL draft

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

Q: Everyone was prattling along about Wes (Welker) and Elvis (Dumervil) while Jason Hunter quietly slipped out the door for Oakland without a word from the Post writers. Now, with no Elvis and no Hunter, it seems defensive end is going to be a huge need. It seems like Hunter was playing his butt off last year in training camp up until he got hurt and I was hopeful he'd be able to contribute to the team. What's your take?

A: Tom, the Broncos are in the mix to bring Dumervil back, but both sides took a brief cooling-off period as Dumervil signed with a new agent.

Dumervil's former agent did waive the normal waiting period of five days when a switch in representation occurs, so Dumervil could start negotiating with teams as quickly as possible.

He formally made the switch Saturday, turned in the paperwork with the NFL Players Association and his new representatives — Tom Condon and the high-powered CAA agency — were talking to teams, Broncos included, Sunday and Monday.

The Broncos can't, and may not even want to, do everything they had done with the contract before. They have taken a \$4.9 million hit against the salary cap by releasing Dumervil. And now to sign him for something close to the \$8 million he was set to earn this year in the failed deal would be pushing Dumervil's total salary-cap charge for '13 back toward where the Broncos didn't want it in the first place.

So, it will take some creativity on both sides if each is serious about Dumervil coming back to the Broncos. And the market isn't great, but it's not that people don't like him as a player. It's that most of the big money in free agency is already spoken for after a week of outgoing checks around the league.

Dumervil, after such a high-profile gaffe, may simply want to move on and start fresh in a new locker room.

If the Broncos can't work out a deal, defensive end certainly moves to the top of the list of needs for the draft. It's a deep year at the position, as well as in the defensive line overall, and the Broncos would need someone to play the right defensive end, especially in the downs when the Broncos are in more traditional defensive fronts and Von Miller isn't lined up there.

Dumervil, after all, played more snaps than any other player in the defensive line last season. The Broncos will also look at a deep class of defensive tackles in the draft even though they signed Terrance Knighton and re-signed Kevin Vickerson at the position.

In Hunter's case, he simply wasn't really on the Broncos' radar in their free-agency plan.

He was playing well in training camp last summer, and had moved ahead of Robert Ayers and some others at the left defensive end spot. Head coach John Fox liked his effort and his toughness, as did defensive coordinator Jack Del Rio as Hunter was repeatedly involved in scuffles during practice.

At the time he said, "I'm just trying to get noticed any way I can. I want them to know I want to play."

But when Hunter suffered a torn right triceps and spent the season on injured reserve, rookie Derek Wolfe went on to start 16 games at left defensive end. And that's essentially Wolfe's spot now. The Broncos didn't see Hunter as a viable option at the right defensive end — the rush end — even on early downs.

So, they didn't make a push to bring him back.

Hunter signed a one-year, \$715,000 deal with the Raiders. He played in Green Bay when current Raiders general manager Reggie McKenzie was in the Packers' front office, and Hunter played for current Raiders coach Dennis Allen when Allen was the Broncos defensive coordinator in 2010.

Hunter is 29 — he will turn 30 during the 2013 preseason — and has 11 sacks in 88 career games with the Packers, Lions and Broncos. At the time of his injury, he was poised for the most playing time in his career, or at least as much as the 2010 season when he started 12 games for the 4-12 Broncos.

The Broncos, however, moved on. Hunter's best option at that point was the one-year deal he got in Oakland.

Broncos in talks with Elvis Dumervil, new agent

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — The Broncos have not given up on Elvis Dumervil.

The team has been in talks with Dumervil's new agent, Tom Condon in hopes of bringing back their right defensive end who had 20 ½ sacks the previous two seasons.

The Broncos aren't the only team interested in Dumervil, though. The Baltimore Ravens are also negotiating with Condon. Other teams that showed at least initial interest after Dumervil was released Friday to free agency were New England, San Diego, Pittsburgh and Houston showed some interest initially.

The Broncos and Ravens seem to be the frontrunners.

Dumervil became a free agent when his revised, three-year, \$30 million contract with the Broncos that included a reduction in his 2013 salary from \$12 million to \$8 million failed to get faxed in time to beat a 2 p.m. Friday deadline with the NFL office in New York.

Faced with having Dumervil's \$12 million salary become fully guaranteed, the team released Dumervil to free agency.

After the fax fiasco, Dumervil fired his agent and hired Condon. One of Condon's first acts on Dumervil's behalf was to approach the NFL to see if the previous agreement between the two parties could be honored.

But the league denied Condon, as it did the Broncos a few days earlier.

"All contracts are reviewed by our office," said NFL commissioner Roger Goodell. "If there is something significant they'll bring it to my attention, but those are done as a matter of course."

Patriots owner claims offering receiver Wes Welker "a better deal"

By Jeff Legwold
The Denver Post
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PHOENIX — Four days after Wes Welker had been formally introduced as the newest Broncos wide receiver, Patriots owner Robert Kraft went on the offensive Monday at the NFL's annual meetings.

Kraft said Welker's agent, David Dunn, "over-valued" Welker on the open market. Kraft added he believed the Patriots had offered a better deal for Welker to stay with the Patriots.

In a rare bit of football business transparency from his team, Kraft said Monday the Patriots offered Welker a two-year deal worth "\$10 million plus incentives."

Welker signed a two-year, \$12 million deal with the Broncos that included a \$4 million signing bonus to go with a \$2 million base salary this season. Next season, Welker will have a \$3 million base salary with an additional \$3 million bonus.

Kraft said the Broncos' deal was essentially a one-year affair, something the Broncos' decision-makers dispute. Kraft said the Patriots' last offer to Welker would have given \$8 million in salary and bonuses to Welker this season.

"We just couldn't give Wes what he wanted," Kraft said. "We, in fact, offered him a better deal."

Taking a walk with the great Jim Brown

By Mike Klis
The Denver Post
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SCOTTSDALE, ARIZ. — Following a press conference that announced a lucrative settlement between the NFL and retired players, Jim Brown, who dominated his era like no other running back in NFL history, was walking pretty much by his lonesome from one Biltmore Resort building to another.

So I walked up to him and asked him about Muhammad Ali. Brown and Ali stood together in business and causes in the late 1960s and 70s.

Was Ali the greatest heavyweight boxer of all time?

"No, I don't get that," Brown said.

Well, people call you the greatest running back of all time.

"I don't get into that either," Brown said.

"I think Muhammad was a great one, but there was some other great ones," Brown said. "He was stylish and clever and flashy and courageous. He combined personality with ability at a high level."

The NFL settled its class-action suit that challenged the league for using images of its retired players in NFL Films footage. The league made a ton of money off NFL Films, but the former players made none of it until the league agreed to contribute \$42 million over an eight-year period to a retired-player fund.

"We've come a long way," NFL commissioner Roger Goodell said when asked about the league's response to the retired players plight. "We've still got a ways to go, but we've come a long way."

The league also established an independent licensing agency dedicated to the use of retired player publicity rights.

"This has been a great day, no doubt about it," Brown said. "These lawyers, they have staying power. I think the lawyers realized that because of technology and so on, there had to be an adjustment. Because know one knew what this thing (the NFL) would turn into. So it was time to fix it. And the best way is to concentrate on the future and to take care of your needy."

Should Broncos try to kiss, make-up with Dumervil, or is relationship doomed?

By Mark Kiszla
The Denver Post
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If I were Elvis Dumervil's new agent, here's the first piece of advice I would give him: Never fax. Scan and email. It's quicker. And cheaper. About \$8 million cheaper.

After the contract snafu, should the Broncos press forward, and try to work out a new deal with Dumervil? The team says it is financially possible. And we know Dumervil still loves his Denver teammates.

But I say it's time for everybody to move on. With all due respect to the three Pro Bowl berths Dumervil earned with the Broncos, he would be better served joining a team that allows him to play outside linebacker in a 3-4 defensive scheme. Peter Burns, however, disagrees. He thinks it's not too late to salvage a beautiful relationship between a top-notch defender and the Broncos. Listen to our debate here:

What would you do with Dumervil? Where should he play football this season? Do the Broncos have viable options for a pass-rusher? Your thoughts, please.

The Art of Procrastination

By Bill Barnwell

ESPN.com

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There's something truly momentous about the chaos produced when an agent screws up. It's rare to see somebody try to both cover their ass and point the finger at somebody else at the same time, but that moment when an agent forgets about a deadline or gives terrible advice is just remarkable. You might remember that the saga that ended with Terrell Owens being dealt to the Eagles before the 2004 season came about as a result of his agent forgetting to send in a form that would have made him an unrestricted free agent, extending his contract with the 49ers by three seasons. To that incident we can now add Faxgate, the bizarre situation surrounding Elvis Dumervil that ended with the three-time Pro Bowler's release by the Denver Broncos on Friday.

The circumstances leading into the incident are clear: The Broncos had no intention of paying Dumervil the \$12 million he was due for this upcoming season, and they told Dumervil they would cut him if he didn't agree to a restructured contract (with a pay cut) by March 15, the date on which Dumervil's salary became guaranteed. Dumervil reportedly refused at first before either he or his agent, Marty Magid, realized his release would push Dumervil into the free-agent market well after the little money available around the league had been spent, at which point they began to negotiate a pay cut.

Here's where it gets murky. The organization claims it set a deadline for Dumervil to decide on a deal by 3 p.m. EDT, one hour ahead of the 4 p.m. deadline at which Dumervil's salary would be guaranteed for the upcoming season. It says Dumervil's agent declined the deal at 3 p.m. only to change his mind 25 minutes later and then fail to get the paperwork for the new contract in before the final few minutes of the league-imposed deadline, at which point the Broncos were left with no choice but to release Dumervil.

Magid tells a different story. He claims the Broncos changed the terms of Dumervil's deal on him shortly after 3 p.m., with new language that allowed Denver to cut him after 2013 without paying Dumervil another penny. Magid says he then had to discuss the new terms of the deal with Dumervil and have him approve the change, which occurred around 3:30 p.m. and led to published reports that Dumervil had agreed to restructure his deal to stay with the team. Various issues with fax machines and additional contract language caused the deal to stretch to the final minutes of the hour, at which point the Broncos panicked and cut Dumervil.

It's impossible to suss out the entire truth from the two stories, but even given his side of affairs, it seems easy to blame Magid for leaving it until the last moment. (That Dumervil fired Magid over the weekend makes things pretty clear.) By Magid's own admission, Dumervil had to drive to a Miami Kinko's inside the final half hour of the deadline to try to fax his signed paperwork to the team. Why didn't he have his client near a working fax machine at the time of the deadline just in case something went wrong? And more disconcertingly, why was this still being negotiated down to the wire? Even if the Broncos changed the terms, Magid should have been able to read the coming buyer's market and realize far earlier in this process that his client didn't want to become a free agent (and convinced Dumervil of that fact). The Broncos would undoubtedly have preferred a deal to be struck or planned before free agency began, freeing up cap space for them to pursue veterans as part of their win-now plan. As it seems, it looks like Magid tried to work the market to find a new long-term deal for his client that either fell through or never appeared, and a frantic attempt by both sides to produce a compromise didn't work.

It's unlikely the Broncos will now re-sign Dumervil. His release created just less than \$9 million in cap space, but he now accounts for nearly \$5 million in dead money on Denver's 2013 cap. If the Broncos gave him the \$8 million that his restructured deal promised for the 2013 season, his cap hold would be almost exactly what it was before this whole mess started. The Broncos will also be up against the cap in 2014, so Dumervil wouldn't get to see a large base salary until the 2015 season, at which point the Broncos could very well choose to cut him again. And if you were Dumervil, would you go back to play for peanuts with an organization that just did this to you? The Broncos will instead likely turn to Dwight Freeney, who would take a pay cut and join his old quarterback in Denver on a short-term deal.

Instead, Dumervil will float late onto a market that never had much money to spend on pass rushers to begin with. Dumervil's old contract came about as a result of a 17-sack season that sticks out on his record like a sore thumb; even if you don't include the year Dumervil missed with a torn pectoral muscle, he's averaged 9.3 sacks across his five other professional seasons. At 29, Dumervil wasn't going to get Paul Kruger money, let alone his previous deal; now, with the likes of Cliff Avril, Michael Bennett, and Connor Barwin taking deals that came in well below expectations, Dumervil might need to take a one-year deal for \$5 million or so from a contender to try to raise his stock before hitting free agency again in 2014.

Oh, and one more thing: Can it be time to move on from fax machines already, NFL? It's incredible that a sport worth so many billions of dollars is incapable of employing some web-based solution to allow players and teams to process these sorts of things in moments as opposed to minutes. It's 2013! PDFs are a thing! I

mean, what are you, FIFA? Let's hope that the Dumervil fiasco — a failure that might actually be enough to cost the Broncos a Super Bowl — serves as the impetus to push the NFL technologically into the late-'90s.

Elvis Dumervil, Darrelle Revis will have hard time getting paid

By Albert Breer
NFL.com
March 18, 2013

Are we all good with the #WTFax jokes for now? All good?

Good, because if you want to cut deeper into the Elvis Dumervil situation, it plays into a theme that's been reverberating throughout the NFL and its pool of nearly 2,000 players.

Over the past few weeks, we've seen quarterback Joe Flacco's deal with the Baltimore Ravens come in at a record \$20.1 million per year while contracts signed or agreed to at every other position represent either a) market stagnation or b) the market being corrected.

Two years ago, coming out of the lockout, 12 non-quarterback free agents signed deals worth \$8 million per year or more, not counting franchise-tagged guys who got monster deals later (i.e., Logan Mankins and LaMarr Woodley). Last year, that number shrank to six, with just four non-quarterbacks cracking \$10 million per year. This offseason, just receiver Mike Wallace, offensive tackle Jake Long, safety Dashon Goldson and linebacker Paul Kruger got more than \$8 million per year, and only Wallace exceeded \$10 million.

Getting back to Dumervil, should it be any surprise that the Denver Broncos thought \$12 million was simply too much to pay for a player who was viewed internally as less-than-complete in 2012?

Of course not.

The salary cap is flat, and while quarterback dollars and minimums are going up, the expected middle-class crunch has proven to have greater consequences and a longer reach than most anticipated.

At the NFL Annual Meeting on Sunday night, New York Jets owner Woody Johnson was asked about trading cornerback Darrelle Revis, and he responded like this: "I think you need to look at the entire 53. To build a team, if you don't look at the whole 53, you're not going to make it. It starts with the quarterback. You've got to get your quarterback going, and then you have to work on the 53. Everybody has to add. It's not one player."

The underlying point reveals why the Jets are looking to deal Revis. It's not because they don't think he's a great player, or because they doubt he'll come all the way back from reconstructive knee surgery. It's about a philosophical decision. Should the Jets invest in Revis -- who, with a contract that pays him \$11.5 million per year, is already the NFL's highest-paid defensive back -- as if he's the game's best defensive player? That would mean giving him money in the Mario Williams/Julius Peppers range, or close to it -- buzz around the league indicates that Revis is looking for about \$14 million per year.

Based on the way things are going league-wide, the Broncos couldn't justify paying Dumervil \$12 million per season. Similarly, it seems the Jets are reluctant to saddle themselves with the figures they believe Revis is seeking, especially considering how the market for cornerbacks has sagged.

With that in mind, a look at the 27 players in the NFL making \$12 million or more per year can be instructive. There are 12 quarterbacks, according to league and union records, in that group, while 15 play at other positions (see table).

Wallace is the only player from this year's free-agent group on that list. The overall trends are even more pronounced when the rest of the market is considered.

Last year, cornerbacks Brandon Carr (\$10.02 million per year from the Dallas Cowboys), Cortland Finnegan (\$10 million per from the St. Louis Rams), Eric Wright (\$7.5 million per from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers) and Carlos Rogers (\$7.33 million per from the San Francisco 49ers) landed relatively big deals. This year, Cary Williams got a back-loaded deal worth \$5.67 million per year from the Philadelphia Eagles, Sean Smith got \$5.5 million per year from the Kansas City Chiefs and Derek Cox got \$5 million per year from the San Diego Chargers. Aqib Talib and Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie, meanwhile, settled for one-year, \$5 million contracts from the New England Patriots and Broncos, respectively.

Last year, a guard with a history of weight issues, Carl Nicks, took home \$9.5 million per year from the Bucs. This year, Long, a former All-Pro left tackle (albeit one with an injury history), got just \$8.5 million per year from the St. Louis Rams.

Eyebrows have been raised, to be sure. Beyond just that, some are wondering about the futures of the guys on that list.

Arizona Cardinals sources maintain that team's focus is on building around Fitzgerald rather than using him as any sort of chip. Sources in Buffalo and Chicago say that, at least for now, Williams' and Peppers' deals are manageable. Johnson and Peterson are such centerpieces in Detroit and Minnesota that trading them would be unthinkable. But that won't stop other teams from asking.

Maybe -- eventually -- one of the clubs employing one of those well-heeled guys looks at the draft-pick return and added financial flexibility that would come with a trade and decides it's too much to pass up.

That, it seems, is where the Jets currently are.

For now, it's clear that the NFL's math is changing in a very deliberate way. If you're a quarterback, you might not feel the pinch. If you're anyone else, you probably will.

And as Dumervil found out Friday afternoon in a Miami-area print-shop, these teams aren't bluffing when they say that something's gotta give.

Lawyer: Broncos safety denies Vegas casino charge

Associated Press

March 18, 2013

NORTH LAS VEGAS, Nev. (AP) — A lawyer says he's trying to resolve criminal allegations that Denver Broncos safety Quinton Carter cheated at a craps game at a Las Vegas-area casino.

Attorney Andrew Leavitt appeared on Carter's behalf Monday before a North Las Vegas judge who postponed action in the case until April 18. Carter didn't appear.

Leavitt says Carter "adamantly denies" adding \$5 chips to three bets after the dice already rolled.

The 24-year-old former North Las Vegas high school football star was arrested late on March 9 at the Texas Station casino in North Las Vegas, where police say security video showed the acts.

Carter faces three felony charges of fraudulent act in a gaming establishment that each carries a possible sentence of one to six years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Updated AFC West draft order

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 18, 2013

Now that the NFL had awarded 32 compensatory picks Monday, the draft order is set. It, of course, will change based on trades. But for now, let's look at each AFC West team's picks:

Denver: Rounds 1 (28), 2 (58), 3 (90), 4 (125), 5 (161), 7 (234)

Kansas City: Rounds 1 (1), 3 (63, 96) 4 (99), 5 (134) 6 (170, 204) 7 (207)

Oakland: Rounds 1 (3), 3 (66), 4 (100) 6 (172, 205) 7 (209, 219)

San Diego: Rounds 1 (11), 2 (45), 3 (76), 4 (110), 5 (145), 6 (179), 7 (221)

Longshot to keep Dumervil in Denver fails

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 18, 2013

Elvis Dumervil's new agent, Tom Condon, and the Denver Broncos lost an appeal to get the verbal agreement honored by the NFL. The agreement was turned in after the league's deadline on Friday.

It was considered a longshot, anyway because had the NFL honored the deal the rest of the league would have been upset.

The Denver Post reports that the Baltimore Ravens are currently negotiating with Dumervil. The Broncos want Dumervil back and he wants to return, but there are salary issues.

The Denver Post reports the Broncos' first choice to replace Dumervil, 29, if he signs elsewhere will be former Atlanta pass-rusher John Abraham. He was productive last season, but he will turn 35 in May.

AFC West teams: NFL salary cap update

By Bill Williamson

ESPN.com

March 18, 2013

Via the great John Clayton, I have some updated NFL salary cap numbers for each AFC West team. Remember, the salary cap is always fluid, so this is more of a guide of where each team stands as free agency moves to the second phase.

Denver Broncos

Cap room: \$8.44 million

Comment: This is a result of the Elvis Dumervil fiasco. Denver needs to find a pass-rusher whether it's Dumervil or another player.

Kansas City Chiefs

Cap room: \$5.48 million

Comment: This does not include the deal for lineman Geoff Schwartz. The Chiefs can find some more room, but they've done a lot of heavy lifting so far.

Oakland Raiders

Cap room: \$7.54 million

Comment: This does not include the deals for Nick Roach, Pat Sims and Kevin Burnett. The Raiders can find some more room by restructuring or cutting Carson Palmer and Tommy Kelly.

San Diego Chargers

Cap room: \$9.95 million

Comment: This does not include the deals for Derek Cox and Ronnie Brown, so the number is closer to \$7 million.

Robert Kraft blames Wes Welker's departure on his agents

Jim Corbett
USA TODAY
March 18, 2013

PHOENIX -- New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, still stinging from public fallout over the loss of popular slot receiver Wes Welker and a report that the team didn't even make Welker an offer, Monday debunked the report and blamed Welker's departure on his agents, who "misrepresented" his market value.

Welker signed a two-year \$12 million contract with the Denver Broncos on Thursday, a person with knowledge of the negotiations told USA TODAY Sports. The person requested anonymity because terms had not been made public -- until Kraft discussed them Monday.

"We usually don't talk about contracts, but I'd like to clear up what I think is some misconceptions about the Wes situation," Kraft told a group of reporters at the owners' meeting. "Everyone in our organization wanted Wes Welker back. Anyone who doubts that, or thinks we weren't serious, just doesn't get it.

"I really wanted Wes to be with us through the rest of his career, but it takes two sides to do a deal."

Welker, 31, had five 100-reception seasons with the Patriots since 2007, including 118 catches for 1,354 yards with six touchdowns last season.

Kraft said the Patriots were willing to pay Welker above his market value and had tried to sign him to a long-term deal that would have avoided franchising him in 2012 at \$9.5 million.

"In retrospect, I wish we could have wrapped that into an arrangement where it was part of a longer-term deal," Kraft said.

He then added: "But I really believe in this case, his agents misrepresented, in their mind, what his market value was. When you come right down to the bottom line, he accepted a deal in Denver that is less money than what we offered him."

Welker's agent, David Dunn, refused comment when asked by USA TODAY Sports.

Kraft said the Patriots' two-year offer would have paid Welker \$8 million in the first year. Welker, he said, will receive only \$6 million from the Broncos for the first season, "and there is no guarantee that he plays the second year there."

He added: "Our offer was better than what he got from Denver and I'm just really sad about that."

Kraft said that Welker called him Wednesday to discuss the deal the Broncos and Patriots had on the table. And had Welker called a day earlier, "he would have been with us."

The Patriots moved on quickly by signing Welker's replacement, former St. Louis Rams receiver Danny Amendola, to a five-year, \$31 million deal.

Kraft said he has spoken to quarterback Tom Brady, who restructured his contract to accept less than his market value to create salary cap room to sign and retain players, presumably Welker, who was Brady's friend and favorite target. Kraft said reports that Brady is angry are inaccurate.

"I don't answer to Tom Brady," Kraft said. "He's an important member of the team and we've chatted. He did what he did to put us in the best position to build a team around him and win games. We've chatted about it."

"But he has never ... it has been reported that he, or people close to him, have made certain comments. None of that is true. I've spoken with him directly. Whomever is creating that impression is mistaken."

Kraft said Brady "has never put a demand" on the team when it comes to personnel moves.

Kraft then pointed out a trend of this free-agent market.

"If I'm a fan, I say to Kraft, to (coach Bill) Belichick, 'You've got to sign, Wes. You've got to do whatever it takes to get it done,'" Kraft said. "But let me tell you what's happened in the NFL this year: The top 25 (free-agent) players have received \$700 million. How many Pro Bowls do any of you think cumulatively any of those players have gone to? Six.

"So that tells you the trend has gone to signing young, up-and-coming players."

NFL free agency report cards: Seahawks on the 'A' list

Nate Davis
USA TODAY
March 18, 2013

The NFL's 2013 free agency period begins its seventh day Monday. But with most of the best available players now off the market, it's not too early to issue the first offseason report cards:

Arizona Cardinals (C): At the outset of free agency, they only had about \$3 million available. But new GM Steve Keim has made quite a few moves to churn his roster: he signed QB Drew Stanton and parted with Kevin Kolb, picked up RB Rashard Mendenhall after punting Beanie Wells and completely remade the secondary. But should Keim have devoted his newfound money to a worrisome O-line in order to give Stanton (or whomever) a chance? Maybe next month.

Atlanta Falcons (B+): With all-pro TE Tony Gonzalez convinced not to retire, LT Sam Baker re-signed and the running back position upgraded with Steven Jackson, a previously intimidating offense could really frighten defenses in 2013. But given the current holes in the pass rush and at corner, the Falcons may have to win a lot of track meets next season.

Baltimore Ravens (B): The myriad losses must be weighed against the mandate to re-sign Super Bowl MVP Joe Flacco. Yet the departures of WR Anquan Boldin and ILB Dannell Ellerbe — which could hurt more than Ray Lewis' retirement — have to sting, and it's hard to believe FS Ed Reed is still in play. But let's look forward to hindsight, when GM Ozzie Newsome almost never has egg on his face.

Buffalo Bills (C-): Wise to put an economical franchise tag (\$6.9M) on Pro Bowl FS Jairus Byrd, yet they didn't use available resources to keep G Andy Levitre, who would've been a boon to the next quarterback. Given the lack of depth behind WR Stevie Johnson, very odd the Bills didn't bother to tender restricted receiver Donald Jones, a player the Patriots found worthy of a three-year deal.

Carolina Panthers (I/incomplete): New GM Dave Gettleman was handed some ugly contracts and little cap flexibility on his way into the job. Pretty tough to assess his team's offseason at this point since there isn't much he can do.

Chicago Bears (B+): No disrespect to decorated MLB Brian Urlacher, but if he's ultimately cast off in favor of a legitimate left tackle (Jermon Bushrod) and

combination tight end (Martellus Bennett) for QB Jay Cutler, GM Phil Emery is probably doing the right thing.

Cincinnati Bengals (D): This club, which appeared to be one or two difference-makers from graduating to Super Bowl threat from fringe playoff team, had \$43 million in cap space even after franchising DE Michael Johnson for \$11.2M. Most of that money is still sitting in the coffers — we wouldn't consider getting MLB Rey Maualuga back a significant win — and formidable RT Andre Smith remains unsigned.

Cleveland Browns (B+): Unlike their Ohio cousins, the Browns did a nice job selectively spending their cache of cash and might have even gotten defensive upgrades Paul Kruger and Desmond Bryant at below-market value. This is how you handle free agency — spend judiciously and spin the rest of the money forward when you have talent to reinvest in.

Dallas Cowboys (C+): With their cap strapped and further reduced by the second dosage of last year's \$10M penalty, it's remarkable they kept pass rusher Anthony Spencer.

Denver Broncos (A-): They kept the one guy they had to, franchising all-pro LT Ryan Clady, before adding new talents (WR Wes Welker, G Louis Vazquez) whom QB Peyton Manning will appreciate. CB Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and DT Terrance Knighton are nice win-now moves. The obvious blemish is the controversial release of DE Elvis Dumervil. But Denver was prepared to part with him anyway and might ultimately end up with a more complete player in his stead.

Detroit Lions (B+): Given how tight his budget looked, GM Martin Mayhew has done a masterful job of procuring key upgrades (RB Reggie Bush, S Glover Quin) while hanging on to CB Chris Houston and FS Louis Delmas. The offensive line does loom as a potentially serious problem following LT Jeff Backus' retirement.

Green Bay Packers (A-): Despite having roughly \$20 million at his disposal, GM Ted Thompson hasn't opened the checkbook. It appears the money is earmarked for OLB Clay Matthews III, NT B.J. Raji and (perhaps) WR James Jones — all free agents in 2014 — and QB Aaron Rodgers, who's in line for a raise. No arguments here — including a tough divorce with WR Greg Jennings — especially if Thompson gets a good back in the draft.

Houston Texans (I): Their grade might eventually hinge on the outcome of last week's high-profile dalliance with Reed. Having Whitney Mercilus in house made Connor Barwin expendable, but S Glover Quin will be missed while the special teams remain in disarray. WR Brian Hartline would have been a perfect complement to Andre Johnson, but the Texans never got a shot at him.

Indianapolis Colts (A-): Like the Bengals, Indy had deep pockets to fill in the gaps around a young core. Unlike Cincinnati, the Colts spent and went for mid-level quantity rather than upper-echelon (read: expensive) quality, Pro Bowl S LaRon Landry being an exception. But the blocking in front QB Andrew Luck looks improved, and the defense head coach Chuck Pagano envisioned appears to be crystallizing.

Jacksonville Jaguars (B+): They tied for the NFL's worst record (2-14) in 2012, yet have signed just five players despite a \$28 million reserve ... and unless you once had RB Justin Forsett on your fantasy team, you probably haven't heard of any of them. Yet it's exactly the correct strategy given the foundation new GM Dave Caldwell must first establish via the draft.

Kansas City Chiefs (B+): Andy Reid's Dream Team background is reason for pause. But despite his new squad's struggles in 2012, it had six Pro Bowlers on the roster, and that didn't include re-signed WR Dwayne Bowe or franchised LT Branden Albert. The acquisition of QB Alex Smith, influx of less well-known talent at palatable cost — CB Sean Smith, DE Mike DeVito and WR Donnie Avery head the list — not to mention the jettisoning of a few underperformers recast this franchise as playoff-caliber.

Miami Dolphins (B-): They had money to burn, yes, but didn't they severely overpay for WR Mike Wallace and LBs Ellerbe and Philip Wheeler, whose deals add up to more than \$120 million collectively? Will they rue not setting aside some of that coin for departed LT Jake Long? TE Dustin Keller and WR Brandon Gibson were shrewder acquisitions.

Minnesota Vikings (A): They kept two of MVP Adrian Peterson's favorite blockers by re-signing RT Phil Loadholt and Pro Bowl FB Jerome Felton. But landing model citizen WR Greg Jennings after exchanging moody Percy Harvin for Seattle's first-round pick looks like quite the deft stroke. The arrival of QB Matt Cassel could also prove a steal.

New England Patriots (D+): The jury is out on what amounts to a free agent swap of Welker for younger but less durable Danny Amendola, and no one will be watching more closely than QB Tom Brady with his new cap-friendly deal. CB Aqib Talib is back, and maybe S Adrian Wilson is the next coming of Rodney Harrison. And there appear to be several more irons currently in the fire, so this grade may soon require revision. But the receiving corps looks weaker without Welker and Brandon Lloyd, and you have to wonder what the Patriots see in Donald Jones that the Bills didn't. And whither RT Sebastian Voller?

New Orleans Saints (D+): With virtually zero cap space and the defense transitioning to the 3-4 front, tough choices loomed. And a big decision will be

questioned after the Saints opted to shell out for CB Keenan Lewis, who has one solid season under his belt, rather than for Bushrod's accomplished four-year resume as a starter. Skeptics are waiting to pounce.

New York Giants (B-): They made the tough call to part with many of their Super Bowl stalwarts, RB Ahmad Bradshaw and DE Osi Umenyiora among them, in order to promote or sign younger players. If LT William Beatty remains healthy, re-upping him will be a good move. However the tenuous status of restricted WR Victor Cruz remains a concern.

New York Jets (C): A lot of guys who helped QB Mark Sanchez be effective in the past — Keller, RB Shonn Greene and RG Brandon Moore are gone — and a once-proud defense has been decimated. But an overhaul is needed, hence new GM John Idzik's thrifty moves. He better hope keeping all-pro CB Darrelle Revis around and letting him get healthy works out to both parties' advantage.

Oakland Raiders (B+): GM Reggie McKenzie cut former first-rounders Darrius Heyward-Bey and Michael Huff before letting productive younger players like Bryant, Wheeler and TE Brandon Myers walk out the door. If it seems McKenzie is hastening the franchise's descent to rock bottom, Raiders fans should take heart that it's the correct course as he replenishes cap space and draft picks.

Philadelphia Eagles (B): Many of Reid's splashy additions — Rodgers-Cromartie, CB Nnamdi Asomugha, DT Cullen Jenkins — were swept out as GM Howie Roseman focused on importing personnel to fit the new 3-4 defense. OLB Connor Barwin was a nice prize given his modest \$8M guarantee. The offense still remains a bit of a mystery.

Pittsburgh Steelers (C): Releasing OLB James Harrison to satisfy the cap is a blow, but GM Kevin Colbert had little recourse. QB Bruce Gradkowski is better than the guys who had backed up Ben Roethlisberger. Wallace and Keenan Lewis will be missed, but Colbert just couldn't afford them and apparently didn't deem them worthy of reshuffling the rest of the roster.

St. Louis Rams (B+): If free agency is any indication, St. Louis is very confident its youngsters are ready to supplant Amendola, Gibson and Jackson. New LT Jake Long and TE Jared Cook should make QB Sam Bradford a very happy man. Armed with two first-round picks, the Rams' drastic improvement over the past year should continue at draft time.

San Diego Chargers (D+): Under new leadership, they're also in rebuild mode. But shouldn't they have done something — re-sign Vasquez, get another premier blocker or acquire a reliable receiver — to send a positive message to embattled QB Philip Rivers instead of signing brittle CB Derek Cox or role-playing RBs Danny

Woodhead and Ronnie Brown? At this point, trading Rivers might be new GM Tom Telesco's best move.

San Francisco 49ers (B): They chose to move on from all-pro FS Dashon Goldson and a few others. But given this team's return to NFL royalty under GM Trent Baalke and coach Jim Harbaugh, who's going to argue? WR Anquan Boldin and DE Glenn Dorsey look like cost-effective additions, but is Craig Dahl really the man to fill Goldson's cleats?

Seattle Seahawks (A): The offense (Harvin) and defense (DEs Cliff Avril and Michael Bennett) have been supercharged, and the pay scale really didn't suffer much even if GM John Schneider had to part with a few picks, including this year's first rounder, for Harvin. The Niners should be worried.

Tampa Bay Buccaneers (B): The NFL's worst air defense looks better with the arrival of Goldson. The Bucs haven't addressed their pass rush — yet (the cookie jar isn't empty) — but will get third-year DE Adrian Clayborn back from IR.

Tennessee Titans (B): They've been uncharacteristically active and needed to be in order to better assess third-year QB Jake Locker. Levitre is a nice cornerstone to make life better for Locker, RB Chris Johnson and newly signed Greene. TE Delanie Walker's arrival offsets Cook's departure.

Washington Redskins (D): They continue to verbally rail against the \$36M penalty the league slapped on their cap last year but haven't strongly pursued further action, suggesting their constrained spending is largely a problem of their own making. This looks like a team ready to take a step backward in 2013.

Big money for pass rushers goes up in smoke

Mike Garafolo
USA TODAY
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Congratulations, Mario Williams, on being born in 1985. Had you arrived a year later, your net worth might be a lot less than it is now.

Williams, the Buffalo Bills' defensive end, signed a six-year, \$96 million contract last March. That figure is astronomical compared to the deals given to the top pass rushers this year.

Arguably, Cliff Avril was the top pass rusher heading into free agency. And when he signed a reported two-year, \$15 million contract with the Seattle Seahawks, the players behind him must have gasped. Well, the news only gets worse.

The deal's actual base value is \$13 million, according to a person who has reviewed the contract. The person, who spoke to USA TODAY Sports on condition of anonymity because the terms weren't to be discussed publicly, said Avril received \$6 million fully guaranteed, not the \$11 million previously reported.

The additional \$5 million is part of his \$7 million base salary for 2014 and is guaranteed for injury only. It doesn't get fully guaranteed until the fifth day of the 2014 league year.

Last year, Avril turned down a three-year, \$30 million offer to remain with the Detroit Lions. Now, he's going to earn a little more than half of that average per year.

The numbers on Avril's deal with Seattle are bad news for John Abraham, Dwight Freeney and Osi Umenyiora — three of the top available pass-rushing defensive ends who hoped for Avril and others to set the market much higher. At the ages of 31 (Umenyiora), 33 (Freeney) and 34 (Abraham), those veterans will have a tough time convincing general managers they should make as much as Avril, who, at 26, is in his prime.

And how does Elvis Dumervil feel right now? If he had accepted the Denver Broncos' offer of a restructure in time to file the paperwork before last Friday's deadline, he'd be in line to earn \$8 million this season, which is \$2 million more than Avril will earn. (Avril has another \$700,000 in sack incentives this year and next. The number of sacks needed to trigger those incentives was not available.)

The NFL is a league built around quarterbacks. So if disrupting the passer remains paramount, why, suddenly, are pass rushers such bargains? A flat salary cap is one factor, as is a deep draft class for defensive linemen. Also, "run stopping" isn't often mentioned as a strong point of the available players.

Quarterbacks, however, are still getting paid. Just ask Joe Flacco, who signed for \$20.1 million a season.

Elite wide receivers are also making out well. Former Pro Bowlers Mike Wallace (five years, \$60 million) and Dwayne Bowe (five years, \$56 million) both hit it big.

And though Jake Long didn't crack the \$10 million mark, as he'd hoped, left tackles are still getting more than \$8 million a season.

The squeeze on salary had to come somewhere, and some of the positions getting pinched are cornerbacks and defensive ends.

Things should pick up on the pass-rushing market this week. Here's a breakdown of where things stand, according to several people informed of the talks with pass rushers. Those people spoke to USA TODAY Sports on condition of anonymity because negotiations were to remain private:

-- Dumervil, after firing his agent, is represented by CAA's Tom Condon and Ben Dogra, who also have Freeney and Umenyiora as clients. At this time last week, CAA was working to get Freeney to Denver. Now it might soon be sending Dumervil, who would prefer to stay with the team that drafted him, back there.

-- Umenyiora has drawn interest from the Miami Dolphins, Detroit Lions and a few other teams. And a return to the New York Giants is not completely out of the question.

-- Abraham received an offer from the New England Patriots during his visit. The details were not available, though money is only one factor for him. Abraham wants a chance to play in a Super Bowl and the opportunity to pad his career sack total as he makes a push for the Hall of Fame.

Wes Welker's camp says Patriots' approach was "take it or leave it"

Michael David Smith
ProFootballTalk.com
March 19, 2013

The hard feelings between the Patriots and their former wide receiver Wes Welker continue.

Responding to Patriots owner Robert Kraft's statement that Welker's "agents misrepresented, in their mind, what his market value was," Welker's agents at Athletes First have released a statement to Albert Breer of NFL Network, saying that there was no negotiating with New England because the Patriots were only interested in telling Welker to take what they were offering and like it.

"[T]he Patriots made one offer to Wes Welker since the prior negotiations ended in July 2012," Athletes First said in the statement. "Both sides also agree that this two-year offer came just hours before the start of free agency despite discussions that began at the NFL Combine. Moreover, this lone offer was presented as a 'take it or leave it offer.' When we asked if there was room for structural changes, we were told no. We made a counter-offer for the same term and same maximum dollar amount as their offer and it was rejected. We inquired if any of the offer's components were negotiable and were told no. This refusal to actually negotiate made it easy to reject the Patriots offer. Nevertheless, when we received the Denver Broncos' offer, Wes personally talked to Mr. Kraft to give the Patriots the opportunity to match it. The Patriots rejected this opportunity and Wes signed with the Denver Broncos."

Hard feelings between Welker and the Patriots have existed since at least last year, when Welker talked about being unhappy playing for the franchise tender. It's too bad that one of the best and most popular players the Patriots have had is leaving on such terms, but the Patriots and Welker don't seem to like each other very much anymore.

Roger Goodell confirms 'alternative calendar' talks

By Gregg Rosenthal

NFL.com

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NFL free agency might not be a part of March Madness for long. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell confirmed that the league is working on a new league calendar which could push back the "Free Agency Frenzy" that took over this website last week.

"We presented an alternative calendar for the offseason," Goodell during his Monday news conference at the NFL Annual Meeting in Phoenix. "We think that it makes a lot of sense. I think the players saw the benefits of doing that and they wanted to talk to their membership, which they were doing last week at their meeting."

The idea is to spread out the NFL's offseason events, perhaps pushing back the NFL Scouting Combine and free agency a few weeks. Free agency could wind up starting in April. This change sounds inevitable.

The commissioner spoke on a variety of other issues Monday, too:

» Goodell talked with MLB Commissioner Bud Selig on two occasions about the scheduling conflict concerning the Baltimore Ravens' Thursday night kickoff. The NFL has asked the Baltimore Orioles to move their game earlier, and Goodell added the NFL is willing to make the kickoff later. The Ravens and Orioles share a parking lot, so they can't play at the same time.

The only other alternative is to make the Ravens play on the road to start the season. Wednesday night is not an option because of Rosh Hashanah.

» Goodell said the recent power outage during Super Bowl XLVII will not impact New Orleans' bid for another Super Bowl in any way. Look for the city to go hard after the 2018 Super Bowl -- it's the city's tercentennial birthday.

» On possibly expanding the playoffs: It clearly won't happen this year. The Competition Committee made some recommendations that the NFL will work on and then present to the NFL Players Association at some point.

» Goodell said the Pro Bowl "improved" this year, but there are "some very good ideas" being kicked around to improve it more. Goodell wouldn't commit to a 2014 Pro Bowl just yet, but it sounds like the game will continue in some form. For now.

MONDAY MORNING QB

Peter King

SI.com

March 18, 2013

PHOENIX -- Lord, the NFC West is going to be a bear of a division in 2013.

That was my first thought as Sunday night turned into Monday morning here at the NFL Meetings, after Jake Long -- 27 years old, beat up the last two years, but two years removed from being the game's premier left tackle -- agreed to a four-year contract to be the Rams' left tackle.

It's a signing fraught with uncertainty. We -- most of us in the media, and fans, and teams -- overrate free agency as a tool to improve teams. How many times (including recently, in 2009) has Washington won free agency, then stunk the joint up when real football began? We yell at the Giants, Steelers and Packers for doing nothing in the free market except bleed players -- more about that in my Tuesday column, with some startlingly honest admissions from Packers GM Ted Thompson -- but tell me: How can you be critical of Thompson or Jerry Reese of the Giants or Kevin Colbert of the Steelers right now? They've combined to win four of the last six Super Bowls. Green Bay is 36 games over .500 in the last six regular seasons, Pittsburgh 30 over, and the Giants 20 over. But more about The Week of the GM tomorrow.

Back to the (sometimes false) hope of free agency. For a franchise that had been trying to compete with one competent tackle, Rodger Saffold, and a Ringling Brothers arrangement on the other side, the Rams getting Long is a big add. Very big. (And I'm told he passed his physical on Wednesday with ease after two battered seasons in Miami.)

Miami was in on Long aggressively, and one Dolphins official Sunday seemed confident Long would return for a sixth year. But no. And the Rams Sunday night were giving the credit for the migration to coach Jeff Fisher. "One of our players texted Jake and told him he'd retire if he had to play for any other coach besides Jeff," Rams GM Les Snead texted me late Sunday night. "Jeff gets veterans to Sunday ready to play ... Gets them to December ready to play ... So yes, he knows how to keep vets fresh physically, mentally and spiritually as good as anyone in the NFL."

There's an arms race in this division, with the Cardinals the only team looking spartan right now. Check out what each team has done since season's end:

Arizona: Hired a new coach, Bruce Arians, who will implement a deep passing game, and a GM, Steve Keim, unafraid of cutting ties with the past (Adrian Wilson, Kevin Kolb, Kerry Rhodes). Josh Cribbs, the Cleveland special-teams ace, was in town Sunday night, hoping to be the 10th middle-class free agent signed by the team this offseason. It'll be tough, though, putting quarterback marginalia (Drew Stanton, maybe Brian Hoyer or Ryan Lindley or John Skelton) up against the arms and strong pass rushes of the NFC West.

St. Louis: Lost three valuable offensive pieces (Steven Jackson, Danny Amendola and Brandon Gibson) who won't be easily replaced. They'll ask Saffold to move to the right side, which he hasn't played. But the Rams desperately needed a top tackle, and signing Long is the best decision they could make, risky though it is. The Rams are the only team with three picks in the top 50 of the draft (16, 22, 46), and they'll need a receiver upgrade after losing two in the first five days of free agency. Tight end signee Jared Cook is an expensive question mark, though Fisher had him in Tennessee and loves him.

San Francisco: Still haven't fixed the secondary, losing hard-hitting safety Dashon Goldson and not adding any corners. That's an absolute must. But they'll have more draft choices in 2013 than any other team -- 15 -- and GM Trent Baalke, despite what the Niners say publicly, has to be thinking about what it would take to acquire Darrelle Revis, with extra picks in the second, third and fourth rounds as chips. Whatever, San Francisco has to be markedly better in the back of the defense to have a chance to win the Super Bowl in 2014. Clutch physical receiver Anquan Boldin will help Colin Kaepernick make plays downfield.

Seattle: "There is no way I thought, a week and a half ago, that we'd have Percy Harvin, Cliff Avril or Michael Bennett on our team this year," GM John Schneider told me here Saturday. "Any of them. Things just fell right for us." At midseason last year, Harvin was on pace for a 120-catch season, then hurt his ankle. Avril, on the outside, and Bennett, inside, should give the Seattle defense high-quality depth. Avril and Bennett came for a combined three years and \$20 million, a pittance compared to what the market looked like it would yield early last week. The addition of Harvin will give Russell Wilson two receivers, Sidney Rice and Harvin, who can beat defenders deep.

I've mentioned this before, but don't go handing the division to the Niners or Seahawks yet. St. Louis was 4-1-1 in the division last year. What if the Rams can keep Sam Bradford (sacked 71 times in his last 26 games) significantly cleaner? And what if Arians can invent a quarterback? That's a huge what-if, and it's doubtful, but this is March. We major in what-ifs in March.

Well, at least the hotel is nice.

No huge items on the agenda this week, as the NFL holds its annual spring meetings at the Arizona Biltmore. The three issues that ought to garner some attention:

The death of the tuck rule. This playing rule, expected to pass, will change the tuck rule -- 12 years late for Raiders fans -- so that a fumble will be ruled if the passer loses possession as he attempts to bring the ball back to his body. The officials will rule a fumble on such a play, and it will be eligible for replay review. "We are going to change this to clean this up and eliminate the tuck rule, so to speak," said Competition Committee co-chair Jeff Fisher.

More steps to take helmet hits out of the game. In his Super Bowl press conference, Roger Goodell said the top safety issue in the NFL was to "take the head out of the game." A rules proposal passed through the Competition Committee in its winter meetings that will try to continue that trend.

The proposal states: "It is a foul if a runner or tackler initiates forcible contact by delivering a blow with the top crown of his helmet against an opponent when both players are clearly outside of the tackle box. Incidental contact by the helmet of a runner or tackler against an opponent shall not be a foul." A running back, for instance, running in the open field or outside the scrum of the line, wouldn't be able to lower his head and use his helmet to hit an on-rushing defender. But a defender wouldn't be able to use his helmet to lower into the head or helmet of the ballcarrier, either.

Emmitt Smith told 105.3 The Fan in Dallas if he didn't lower his head when a linebacker came his way, the linebacker could bust him in the head and he -- the runner -- would be defenseless. "It [the rule] sounds like it's been made up by people who have never played the game of football," Smith said. Well, the Competition Committee doesn't have active players, but it does have a Hall of Fame tight end, Ozzie Newsome, and two former NFL defensive backs, Mark Murphy and Fisher.

In Smith's example, where the linebacker, in his words, "can take my chin off," it'd be a 15-yard penalty if the linebacker specifically lowered his helmet and bashed Smith in the chin with it. After a couple of those, don't you think the defender would learn -- and the coaches would emphasize it in practice, so penalties wouldn't be forthcoming?

Said McKay: "We really think the time has come that we need to address the situation in space when a runner or a tackler has a choice as to how they are going to approach the opponent. You can't make that choice ducking your head and

delivering a blow, a forcible blow, with the top crown of your helmet. We are trying to protect the runner or the tackler from himself in that instance. We realize this is a major change for players and coaches, so we want the obvious foul."

Fisher said he and fellow committee member and Bengals coach Marvin Lewis, "don't feel like it is going to be difficult to explain it and to coach it." I canvassed five teams Sunday and found support for this proposal, but it will probably be close; 24 votes are needed for passage.

Mandatory thigh and knee pads. The NFL passed a rule last year ordering these to be used beginning in 2013, and the time is now. Players will see videos in minicamps this year showing them the kinds of pads that will conform to the rule. "Beginning with the 2013 preseason's first game," NFL VP Ray Anderson said, "enforcement will begin." Uniform inspectors will do random checks in pregame, and the inspectors will have access to the sidelines during games.

Said Anderson: "If a player is caught not wearing the thigh and knee pads or is not wearing appropriate thigh and knee pads, he will be given an opportunity to comply. He will not be permitted in the game until he does comply. If there is a continual refusal to comply, he simply will not be allowed in the game."

The NFL, through its equipment suppliers, has shown how uniform pants and even underwear can be fitted with the thin pads, which the NFL believes will cut down on knee injuries and thigh contusions. Players don't like the pads, generally, because they think they cut down on speed. But now it's not going to matter. It'll be mandatory for all.

Ten Good Ones

The best signings in the first six days of NFL free agency:

1. Denver: WR Wes Welker, two years, \$12 million. I've heard all the stories about Welker, and the anger and bitterness about his departure from New England. That will fade in time. But the Broncos are getting a man who, while missing three regular season games in the last six years, averaged 112 catches a season for New England over that time. That's tremendous. And he'll be used by a quarterback, Peyton Manning, who absolutely loves the slot receiver. If Welker breaks down, which he's shown no sign of doing, the grade will have to be revised here. But if Welker plays 16 games and doesn't catch 100 balls, my name's Joe Don Looney.

2. Philadelphia: TE James Casey, three years, \$14.6 million. "With coach [Chip] Kelly coming in here, I thought it was a great fit for me," Casey said upon signing. Truest words of the week. Recruited to Rice as a quarterback, Casey became an all-purpose back and tight end, and played numerous special teams for Houston. The way Kelly will use Casey (52 catches, 11.3 yards per catch in 969

snaps in Houston over the past two years) is the way the Patriots use their tight ends, and the way San Francisco used Delanie Walker last year: everywhere.

3. New England: CB Aqib Talib, one year, \$5 million. Patriots fans would want it to be a longer deal, because Talib could play himself into a bigger money deal elsewhere if he plays the way he can this year. But the Patriots weren't going to overpay for a player who could blow up in their faces. The best overall cornerback on the market was a must-keep for New England.

4. New Orleans: CB Keenan Lewis, five years, \$26 million. The worst defense in history (by yardage, anyway) was desperate for a cover corner, and I'd say any corner who allows 52.7 percent completions with a league-high 16 passes defended (according to Pro Football Focus) is a marked upgrade for the Saints. I hated the Saints losing their left tackle, but if you ask me if I'd have lost an adequate left tackle (and Jermon Bushrod is that, or just a little better) for the Steelers' best corner in 2012, I'd say sure.

5. Kansas City: CB Sean Smith, three years, \$18 million. At 6-foot-3, Smith is one of the biggest corners in league history -- and six inches taller than the two Chief starters last year. In a division (and league) with receivers getting taller every season, it looks like a smart deal. "[Defensive coordinator] Bob Sutton's scheme is about 85-percent press man, and we think Sean's the type of physical corner who fits the defense perfectly," said GM John Dorsey.

6. Kansas City: DL Mike DeVito, three years, \$12.6 million. One of the best run defenders on the line last season will never be a three-down player, but he wasn't signed to be one. Three other teams wanted DeVito badly.

7. Chicago: TE Martellus Bennett, four years, \$21 million. An offensive tight end who can block. What's not to like?

8. San Diego: RB/returner Danny Woodhead: two years, undisclosed. OK, I don't know the dough, so I can't pass judgment on the wisdom. But I'm sure it's not a huge deal, and Woodhead, in the running, receiving and return game, didn't lose a fumble over the past two seasons in 233 New England touches. Great insurance for the disappointing Ryan Mathews.

9. Atlanta: RB Steven Jackson, three years, \$12 million. A steal. Just go watch what he did last year as the Rams tied San Francisco, in the running and blocking game. A superb effort with vital results: a season-high 29 carries for 101 yards. Atlanta needed a back who could punish defenders, break tackles and make a defender or two per week miss. Michael Turner couldn't do it. Jackson can.

10. Seattle: DL Michael Bennett, one year, \$5 million. Just beats out Miami TE Dustin Keller (one year, \$4.25 million) for this spot. Nine sacks and 62 pressures

last season in Tampa, and you get him for \$5 million, knowing he has to perform big to get a big deal in 2014? Great signing.

* * *

Class Guy of the Week.

Brandon Stokley, slot receiver, Denver.

Think of those last three words -- "slot receiver, Denver" -- and what do you think of? Wes Welker, obviously. But think of Stokley for a moment. A year ago tomorrow, Peyton Manning signed with the Denver Broncos. During his brief free-agent fling, Manning used the home of one of his best friends, Stokley, as a refuge. Stokley lives in the Denver suburb of Castle Pines. A year ago, he was unsigned. Maybe he'd be signed by the Broncos, maybe he wouldn't. But he helped his buddy, Manning, hide out -- and decide what to do.

Manning slept at his good pal Stokley's house the day he got to Denver. The next day, Manning and Stokley got up early because Manning wanted to get a good throwing session in. In secrecy. Off to the park they went -- but there was an early-morning lacrosse game in progress. So Manning and Stokley moved to a community park with a 40-yard-square field. When a jogger would approach, Stokley would yell, "Jogger!" And he or Manning would hide the football and wait until the jogger, or maybe bicyclist, passed.

Stokley knew the routes Manning wanted to throw, and he ran them. And when Manning signed, Stokley, 36, eventually got signed too -- with no promises about whether he'd make the team. He made the team and played 60 percent of the snaps in the slot, catching 45 passes. The last pass of Manning's season, in fact, was to Stokley, and Baltimore's Corey Graham picked it off.

So when it came time to sign Welker to a two-year, \$12 million deal last week, a decision that took the Broncos about 10 seconds to make because Welker's the most productive slot man in football, coach John Fox picked up the phone to inform Stokley. "Heartbreaking," Fox said here Sunday, "because Stokley'd been such a great guy and important player for us."

And Stokley said to Fox, basically, that if he was running the team, he'd go after Welker too.

That's why Brandon Stokley, who may have had his career ended by the acquisition of Welker, is the Class Guy of the Week.

Quote of the Week I

"[It is] what I call a travesty of fairness."

-- Washington general manager Bruce Allen, on the NFL's refusal to back down from its salary-cap-violation sanctions of \$36 million to the team over the past two seasons -- \$18 million last year, \$18 million this year.

Quote of the Week II

"He is ahead of schedule according to [Head Athletic Trainer] Larry [Hess]. That means the muscles are stronger than they anticipated and he is doing everything he can to be ready for this season. Is he going to be ready? I have no idea. I'm sure keeping my fingers crossed, and if work has anything to do with it, he probably will."

-- Washington coach Mike Shanahan, on the rehab of quarterback Robert Griffin III, who underwent knee reconstruction surgery in January. Griffin said he thinks he'll be ready to play opening day, which, for Washington, is 25 weeks away.

Quote of the Week III

"It's not Cruz."

-- Indianapolis owner Jim Irsay, on Sunday, in response to questions about his Twitter exuberance over the Colts' pursuit of a receiver in free agency. Victor Cruz is a restricted free agent for the Giants, and the fact that he and the Giants have been discussing a contract for more than a year without reaching a deal has become the source of great consternation for many New York fans.

Stat of the Week

If the Players Association or league ever wants to drive home the point about why the NFL truly should stand for "Not For Long," go back to the 2008 draft for vivid proof.

Jake Long's departure from Miami to St. Louis in free agency Sunday night means 42 of the top 64 players in the 2008 draft -- not quite five years ago -- are no longer on the teams that drafted them.

That's 66 percent of the drafted players gone from their original teams ... 19 of the first 32, 23 of the next 32.

I would say "first round" and "second round" in the above sentence, but the 2008 draft had an asterisk. The league took New England's 2008 first-round pick away because of the Spygate case, and so the 32nd overall pick, Phillip Merling of Miami, was actually the first pick of the second round.

Factoid of the Week That May Interest Only Me

Before the football, there was a little baseball in Kinglandia over the weekend.

On Friday afternoon, I went to Rangers-Giants in Scottsdale, at San Francisco's home field. Sat on a metal bench seat a little bit past the first-base bag, high in the grandstand. Price for the seat: \$56.

On Saturday afternoon, I went to Reds-Brewers in Maryvale, at Milwaukee's home field. Sat on precisely the same kind of metal bench seat just past the first-base bag, high in the grandstand. Price for the seat: \$16.

The Brewers experience was better. Better beer, less packed, kids getting Racing Sausage autographs, more of a spring training feel. But I kept thinking: The stadium in Scottsdale was teeming with people, all seeming to have fun. To pay \$56 for a spring training game seems the height of insanity, but then again, I did it. So check me into the asylum.

One more point: You can buy four season tickets for the Tampa Bay Buccaneers right now in the upper deck, on the 45-yard line, for a package price of \$2,254. That's 40 tickets -- four tickets per game to 10 games (eight regular season, two preseason). Do the math. The per-ticket cost: \$56.35.

Thus, it costs the same to sit high in the stands at a San Francisco Giants exhibition game as it does to sit high in the stands at a Tampa Bay Buccaneers regular season game.

Mr. Starwood Preferred Member Travel Note of the Week

So Mr. Pro Football Talk, Mike Florio of Bridgeport, W. Va., had gone 15 1/2 years without flying until Sunday. For him, it wasn't a fear of flying so much as a loss of control. When he drove, or was being driven, he could see the road and the other drivers if he wasn't the one driving, and he felt secure knowing that whatever the statistics about the relative safety of flying versus driving said, to him, driving just felt safer.

Florio's usual mode of transportation is a van to and from the Baltimore-Washington International Airport train station, then a train to New York or Stamford, Conn., for his NBC appearances. But nothing in the air since he began to do the smash-hit web stuff on PFT. If a league meeting was too far away, he just wouldn't go. If the Super Bowl was within 20 hours or so in a vehicle, he'd go by van. All the while, his bosses at NBC were working on Florio to join the human, non-Madden race. "[NBC Sports executive producer] Sam Flood kept working on me," said Florio. "He kept sending me links to stories about how safe it was to fly. The one that really got me was the New York Times story that said you'd have to fly every day for something like 112,000 years to be in a fatal plane incident."

Florio wanted to go to this week's league meetings, and Phoenix was going to be too far to drive. So he finally decided to get back on a plane, flying here nonstop Sunday afternoon from Pittsburgh with his wife, Jill.

"It was uneventful," he said once in the Valley of the Sun. "I wish I could tell you some great story about getting all claustrophobic once they closed the door, or something like that. But I can't. I was hoping for a better story. The only thing I can tell you is when we were turning the corner to get out on the runway, my wife said to me, 'Does someone know where our wills are?' And I said, 'I really don't want to think about that right now.' "

What has changed since he last flew: the fact that visitors can't go to the gate with flyers. "The whole security thing is so different," he said. "First, you practically disrobe going through security -- your shoes, your belt, your jacket, and then all your electronics in different bins. Then you get through security, and it's like a ghost town in there."

Maybe on a March Sunday in an airport with increasingly declining traffic, like Pittsburgh's. But I don't go through many ghost towns when I travel.

Welcome back to the aerial race, Florio.

Tweet of the Week I

"NFC West now has three Pro Bowl left tackles. Russell Okung and Joe Staley can welcome Jake Long."

-- @espn_nfcwest, longtime NFL scribe Mike Sando, after Jake Long signed with the Rams Sunday night.

Tweet of the Week II

"I care as much about your bracket as I do about your fantasy football team."

-- @bylindsayhjones, the USA Today football writer.

Tweet of the Week III

"Idzik: 'I expect Darrelle Revis to be a Jet.' Translation: 'No one's giving us the picks we want or giving him the money he wants.' "

-- @adbrandt, ESPN NFL business analyst Andrew Brandt.

Tweet of the Week IV

"Elvis Dumervil's ex-agent just faxed me to wish me Happy Valentine's Day..."

-- @EricStangel, executive producer and writer for The Late Show With David Letterman, on Sunday, after the Dumervil-Broncos-faxing fiasco of Friday afternoon.

Ten Things I Think I Think

King: How Harvin trade affects the Draft

Source: SI

SI.com's Peter King breaks down how the Seahawks' acquisition of WR Percy Harvin from the Vikings affects the draft day plans for both Seattle and Minnesota.

- 1.** I think this is the coldest name of them all here at the NFL Meetings: James Harrison. Cannot find anyone admitting to being interested in the former Steeler. It seems if he wants to play this year, he'll have to do it for less than half of what he was supposed to make for the Steelers. He should have taken the cut the Steelers were offering.
- 2.** I think this is what free agency has taught Jake Long: Three very good years to start the career and two injury-plagued ones with average play are enough to erase the chance for a lucrative second contract. But given that Miami, St. Louis and at least one other team were aggressively trying to sign Long tells you that NFL teams think of him, still, as a starting left tackle with two or three solid years left if he can stay out of injury trouble.
- 3.** I think, speaking of free agency, the tackle market sure has some good leftovers: Super Bowl left tackle Bryant McKinnie, Sebastian Vollmer, Eric Winston, Andre Smith (likely to stay in Cincinnati), and, if some team wants to trade for him, Kansas City's Branden Albert. The Chiefs will listen to offers for him.
- 4.** I think when the 2013 compensatory picks are announced today, the two most notable will be the Texans adding a third-round pick for the loss of Mario Williams to Buffalo, and the Ravens adding (from what I'm hearing) fourth-, fifth-, sixth- and seventh-round picks for the losses of Ben Grubbs, Jarret Johnson, Cory Redding and Tom Zbikowski. The rich get richer. Oh, and the 49ers are likely a fourth- and two seventh-rounders richer as well.
- 5.** I think the cutest thing I saw on the weekend before the NFL Meetings began here at the Arizona Biltmore hotel is the Harbaugh brothers, and families, playing with kids in the hotel pool. Number two: The Harbaugh brothers, out for a 6 a.m. walk together on the jogging path outside the hotel.

6. I think I can't get too excited about the Elvis Dumervil fax fiasco. There are rules, and the rules say the Broncos had to make a decision whether to keep Dumervil or release him by 4 p.m. Eastern on Friday. The contract agreement had to be in Denver's hands by 4, and the Broncos say it wasn't received by then, and so Dumervil was cut. The contract actually was faxed in after the deadline. There's been much hue and cry about it, but if Dumervil was going to take the deal to the deadline the way he did and risk not getting the paper back to the team in time, I blame him. Rules are rules.

7. I think there's a cool football event in South Carolina this weekend, and if you're a fan of football past and present, you'll enjoy it all. The charter members of the South Carolina Football Hall of Fame (including, among others, Harry Carson, Donnie Shell, George Rogers and Sam Wyche) will be inducted at the Cherokee Valley Country Club outside of Greenville Friday night. And on Saturday at 3 p.m. at North Greenwood University, 100 college players with no additional college eligibility -- some hoping for pro careers -- will face off in the South Carolina College All-Star Bowl. Go here for more information.

8. I think when I see headlines about the Jets keeping an open mind on whether or not to trade Darrell Revis, I am heartened that they have not lost their minds. Then I think: They're just saying that. There's far too much smoke out there, and far too little whispering to sources off the record that Revis is going nowhere, for me to believe they aren't desperate to move him. Mistakenly, of course.

9. I think it was nice to speak to you again Sunday night, Sean Payton.

10. I think these are my non-football thoughts of the week:

a. Strangest postseason college basketball matchup I have ever heard: Kentucky at Robert Morris in the first round of the NIT.

b. Ohio at Denver in the NIT Tuesday night. Bobcat fever, baby.

c. Caught pieces of the ESPN Jim Valvano movie Sunday night, and it brought back some incredible memories. I covered Final Fours for the Cincinnati Enquirer in the early '80s, and I was in The Pit in Albuquerque for the North Carolina State win over Phi Slamma Jamma (the University of Houston) in the 1983 finals. N.C. State stunned the world to even get to the finals. I remember arriving in Albuquerque and going to the early press conferences, and thinking N.C. State was a distant fourth behind Houston, Louisville and Georgia. Valvano's team had won games by 2, 1 and 1 points in the regional, and no one was taking him, or his team, very seriously.

I knew Valvano a little bit; at the time I covered Xavier's basketball team, and Bob Staak, the coach, was one of Valvano's best friends, and Valvano walked into

Staak's office one day, carrying a travel bag with his suits over his shoulder, fresh off a recruiting trip to see a player in Cincinnati. They talked like they'd been friends for years, which they had. So Staak was out there in Albuquerque for the Final Four. I was in the second row of press row, even with the basket, when Lorenzo Charles threw down the winning basket at the buzzer, and I recall Valvano running around maniacally -- you've seen all the pictures -- looking for someone to hug. After the game, I tagged along with Staak for the postgame Wolfpack party, and by the time I saw Valvano back at the hotel, he'd just about lost his voice. "What a night! What a night!" he rasped, and at the hotel he hugged everyone he saw. To think that night's become the night of legend is pretty cool.

d. Then the next year as the freshman-Michael Jordan-hits-the-14-foot-jumper to beat Georgetown, then seeing Jordan carrying the film and the film projector on the team plane the next morning, because in Dean Smith's program the freshman carried the film and the projector. Man, that was a fun time to cover college basketball.

e. And, though I have absolutely no idea who is any good in college basketball, I will be watching Thursday and Friday, two of the great days in American sports.

f. My bracket philosophy? Simple -- since the days when I followed the game. I pick the favorite in every game, put my \$20 in the mail to my good buddy Ron Fisch in Montclair, N.J., and hope for the best. I never have won a dime in Ron's pool, so he loves to see my \$20 arrive in the mail.

g. Great to meet you the other day, Cara McDonough. Your old man would be proud of you.

h. Hey Pope Francis: The more you talk, the more I love hearing you talk about the poor. Keep it up.

i. The pope, of course, reads MMQB voraciously.

j. Coffeenerdness: Yes, the Arizona Biltmore is fabulously overpriced. But it has the best hotel coffee I've had in forever.

k. Beer nerdness: Hey Dan Patrick! Had your Redhook Audible Ale the other day at the Giants' game. Really good stuff -- hoppy and rich. Is the next one on you?

l. If I did the 4.2-mile Pat's Run back here in Arizona in a month, could we figure out a fun way to raise money for the Tillman Military Scholar Program? The Tillman Foundation has given scholarships to 230 military service members, or their spouses, for college educations. What better way to pay tribute to the late Tillman than to raise money to educate veterans and their spouses, seeing that education was such a cornerstone to Tillman's life?

m. Maybe we can have an event in Phoenix the night before the race, a Tweetup with a Cardinal or two, with the proceeds going to the Tillman Foundation. I'm open to doing what you think would be best. Send me your best ideas about how we can raise the money, and I'll print them next week, and we'll figure something out.

The Adieu Haiku

Belichick. Smart coach.

That doesn't mean he can't err.

Wes Welker: E-Bill.

Miller Gaining New Perspective on USO Tour

Gray Caldwell
DenverBroncos.com
March 18, 2013

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. -- For Von Miller, it's hard to describe the experience of embarking on a week-long USO tour in the Middle East.

"I can't even put it into words," Miller said on a phone call during a quick break between visiting military bases. "It's just given me a whole new perspective on what it means to be an American."

The Pro Bowl linebacker called the trip "historic," and he has enjoyed getting "a look at the whole military life."

Miller along with teammate Champ Bailey, Browns linebacker D'Qwell Jackson, Buccaneers guard Davin Joseph, Panthers wide receiver Steve Smith and Texans defensive end J.J. Watt, are visiting a number of military bases throughout the Middle East.

"This is a great opportunity to support the service men and women of our armed forces and bring attention to their efforts overseas," Bailey said.

The week-long USO trio is part of a tradition that began more than 45 years ago, when NFL players began taking part in morale-building visits to visit overseas troops.

Miller said that sharing the experience with Bailey has made it all the more special.

"Coming out here with Champ, it's just been a great trip," he said. "I've really enjoyed it."

At one base, the NFL players joined military men and women in a game of football.

[VIEW PHOTOS OF THE FOOTBALL GAME HERE](#)

Miller said it wasn't as lopsided as one would think.

"There's a lot of athletes over here in the military -- they showed their speed out there on the football field," he said. "It was great just going out there and playing around with the guys. It's special being on the field with them."

All-in-all, it's been an experience that Miller said he won't forget. And he hopes the NFL players can provide a "good distraction" from daily life overseas in the military.

"I'm just grateful for our troops over here," he said.