

John Elway's latest grand plan for Broncos will gain clarity at NFL combine

By Nicki Jhabvala

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The NFL scouting combine has been mocked for its drills that seem antiquated and irrelevant, from the 40-yard dash to the long jump. It has earned the unflattering labels of The Underwear Olympics and, most recently, "the cattle auction."

"Sorry 2 the suckers that have to go to the cattle auction this week!" Browns tackle Joe Thomas tweeted Monday. "Don't forget to lie to teams and say how much 'fun' it is! Don't worry; the staff, coaches, and mgmt don't want to be there anymore than you do, so you're not alone. Great for fans though."

The combine is a meat market, with millions of dollars and the futures of NFL hopefuls on the line. And each year the circus expands a little more. Coverage is so saturated that attendance isn't even needed to analyze prospects, as tape of player interviews and drills as well as their medical examinations are sent to every NFL team.

But the combine still holds its value — value that, to many, will never be matched with cameras and doctors: pure coaching.

"I'm constantly evaluating those guys and trying to stack and order them as you go," said Broncos running backs/assistant head coach Eric Studesville. "We won't get all of them done by the time we get to Indy, but by the time you get back, you'll have met and talked to them and seen them in person. That's one of the reasons I love being on the field with them in Indy because I get to coach them a little bit. I get to look at them. How do they take adjustments? Do they listen? Those are all things that are not going to change when you get here. If they don't listen in Indy, they're not going to listen when they come here."

The 2017 combine features 330 players deemed the top of their class, or close to it. The Broncos own 10 draft picks and have more than \$40 million in salary cap space, giving them ample room and plenty of options to tweak the roster that failed to make the playoffs last year.

This offseason, John Elway's seventh as the Broncos' head of football operations, could be his most important yet as he determines the fate of his young quarterbacks, the direction of the offense and the sustainability of the defense.

The focus this year is on revamping both the offensive and defensive lines, to anchor Mike McCoy's new system and to plug the leaks in the run defense. It'll require the right mix of draft picks and free-agency signings.

"We have to get better offensively and we have to compete better offensively to say, 'You know what, we carry half of this load,'" Elway said.

Tuesday morning, Broncos head coach Vance Joseph and his assistants boarded a flight bound for Indianapolis, binders of information on combine participants stuffed into their bags. Awaiting them are days packed with interviews and watching drills. Awaiting Elway are discussions with agents and key decisions on roster moves.

Those binders will expand and Elway's latest plan will gain clarity by week's end. But it starts here, home to The Underwear Olympics and the cattle auction.

"Challenges excite me," Elway said. "That's what it's about. That's how we adjust. Things are going to happen, good and bad. It's all about adjusting."

Jhabvala vs. Kiz: Russell Okung is gone. What should Broncos do at LT?

By Nicki Jhabvala and Mark Kiszla

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Russell Okung is gone. The Broncos need a left tackle. Now what?

Kiz: As everybody in Broncos Country knows, the No. 1 problem for this team can be described in two words: offensive line. Whether the starting quarterback in 2017 is Paxton Lynch, Trevor Siemian or Tony Romo, he's going to get hurt if Denver can't protect his blind side. Three-hundred pound tackles don't grow on trees (even a Sequoia couldn't withstand the strain). So what's next?

Jhabvala: The good news is the Broncos have options, with 10 draft picks (including four tradeable compensatory picks) and more than \$40 million in salary-cap space. The bad news is the tackle group in this year's draft is weak and the free-agent market isn't great either. Alabama's Cam Robinson, Wisconsin's Ryan Ramczyk and Utah's Garrett Bolles are the top-rated tackles in the class of 2017, but the latter two were starters for only one season each at major college programs. And when you factor in the typically difficult transition to the pros for college offensive linemen, the Broncos may be best served scouring the open market. It's thin, but it has grown in recent weeks with a variety of roster moves.

Kiz: Brain-storming here. There are no bad ideas, but not many good left tackles coming out of college or on the free agent market. Do the Broncos take a gamble on the potential of Alabama's Cam Robinson with the 20th pick in the first round? At age 35, how much does Cincinnati free agent Andrew Whitworth have left in the tank? Virgil Green hasn't panned out at tight end; could the Broncos feed him mounds of pasta and let Green grow into the job?

Jhabvala: I'd be hesitant to nab a tackle in the first round. The Broncos need immediate help and improvement. That's never guaranteed with rookies, but the odds are lower this year. Among free agents, yes, Whitworth is older, but still quite good. He gave up only 14 QB pressures last season, according to Pro Football Focus, and will grab plenty of attention on the open market. Kelvin Beachum and Matt Kalil are both 27, but the former dealt with lingering knee issues last season and the latter had hip surgery. Riley Reiff, the 28-year-old right tackle most recently with the Lions, could return to the left side, where he played most of the first four years of his NFL career, and be of interest.

Kiz: I get Romo is as fragile as a wine glass. But the great thing about a veteran quarterback that knows what he's doing: Romo can get the offense in the right play at the line, get the football out quickly on pass plays and make an average offensive line look better. The Denver O-line seems destined to be average at best, even if John Elway signs Whitworth or Reiff.

Jhabvala: Hard to say, really. I don't think we got a clear glimpse of what Siemian could do because he had such weak protection up front and little support in the run game. And Lynch had only two starts, so he remains an unknown. His first NFL year was expected to be tough and it was. But in Mike McCoy's new QB-friendly system, both quarterbacks could surprise in 2017 — and save the Broncos a lot of

money to use on improving both the offensive and defensive lines. Besides, Romo may be more experienced, but experience is worthless if you're nursing another injury because of poor protection from the O-line.

Even with more severe grade 5 separation, Siemian says he will be ready for OTAs

By Mike Klis

9News

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At first, Trevor Siemian downplayed it as “optional surgery.”

His left shoulder, injured in a week 4 win at Tampa Bay during the 2016 season, was still giving him trouble as he tried to lift weights in late-December.

Get it repaired, no big whip.

But then his orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Neal ElAttrache, discovered more damage than originally thought while executing the procedure on Jan. 5 in Los Angeles.

Instead of a grade 3 separation in the AC joint of Siemian’s non-throwing shoulder, Dr. ElAttrache saw ligaments torn in the areas where the clavicle, scapula and AC joint connect. A more severe grade 5 separation was diagnosed. This was not “optional” surgery. The operation was required.

When the surgery was finished, a four to six-month recovery period was given.

“Whether it was grade 3 or grade 4 or grade 5, to me it was irrelevant because the season was over,” Siemian said in a phone conversation Tuesday in his typical understated manner. “This is the offseason and regardless of what the extent was, it’s going to be good to go.”

It has been speculated that the more severe injury would cause Siemian to miss most of the Broncos’ offseason workouts. Not so, he said.

“We’re still on track to be full go for the start of OTAs,” Siemian said. “That’s the plan. The four to six months thing is really more for contact. Unless coach (Vance) Joseph is going to change the rules and have us work on the quarterback slide, I think I’ll be OK.”

Siemian will be limited when the Broncos begin their offseason conditioning program in April. But the more important organized team activities (OTAs) – when the offense is allowed to line up against the defense and run live plays – don’t begin until late-May. That’s close to five months post-Siemian’s surgery. There is no contact during OTAs, at least not during plays involving the so called “skilled positions.”

“If I was an offensive lineman and had to block, I’d probably have problems,” said Siemian, who is back in his hometown of Orlando rehabbing. “But I should be able to make all my throws.”

What the more significant grade 5 separation does show is Siemian was playing the bulk of last season with a more serious injury than people realized. He missed just one game with shoulder separation, and later missed one more because of a midfoot sprain in his left foot. He still managed to post an 8-6 record

in his first NFL season of playing, completing 59.5 percent of his passes for 3,401 yards and 18 touchdowns against 10 interceptions.

As it stands now, Siemian and Paxton Lynch, the Broncos' first-round draft pick last year, will compete for the starting quarterback job this offseason. Siemian says he will be ready to fully compete.

Brandon McManus, Todd Davis, await restricted free agent tenders

By Mike Klis

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Brandon McManus and Todd Davis can expect nice raises from the Denver Broncos this year through the leverage of restricted free agency.

The question is how large those pay increases will become.

McManus, who has emerged as a top 10 to 15 NFL kicker the past two seasons, and Davis, a sure-tackling, starting inside linebacker, each drew a \$600,000 salary last season.

Both are strong candidates to receive a second-round tender this year that is estimated to be worth around \$2.85 million. The deadline for teams to tender contracts to their restricted free agents is March 9.

The Broncos also have the option of placing a lower tender worth an estimated \$1.85 million on McManus and Davis, but because both entered the league as undrafted free agents, competing teams could be tempted to sign them away knowing they wouldn't have to compensate the Broncos with a draft pick. Even if the Broncos would have the right to match a competing offer, a low tender in hopes of saving money now could become costly later.

The Broncos placed a low-round, \$1.67 million tender on running back C.J. Anderson last year. Undrafted, Anderson drew interest from several teams and wound up signing a four-year, \$18 million offer sheet with the Miami Dolphins that included a guaranteed \$6 million in 2016 and \$3 million in 2017.

A second-round tender on Anderson would have meant paying him \$2.553 million on a one-year deal. Broncos' linebacker Brandon Marshall received the second-round, \$2.553 million tender last year and received no interest from other teams. Simply put, teams don't want to surrender a second-round draft pick.

However, perhaps because Anderson helped pave the way by parlaying his restricted free agency into a multiyear deal, Marshall also received a four-year, \$32 million extension last year.

The Broncos also have the option to further secure McManus and Davis with a first-round round tender estimated to be worth \$3.85 million but that is unlikely. Even Justin Tucker, the league's best kicker the past five years, received no more than a second-round tender from Baltimore in 2015.

Broncos offensive guard Sam Brenner is also a restricted free agent but he is not expected to be tendered after he missed all of last season with a serious concussion. Brenner cleared all concussion protocols on Jan. 2 and plans on continuing his playing career.

Broncos ready to spend and find 'value' in free agency

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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The Denver Broncos have made it clear they're ready to spend in free agency if a player, or three, inspires them to do so.

Defensive tackle Earl Mitchell was not one of those players. The Broncos met with Mitchell last week and wined and dined him. But they have been informed that Mitchell intends to formally sign with the San Francisco 49ers.

Mitchell has agreed to terms on a four-year, \$16 million deal that folks in the league say was more than the Broncos had offered. Score one for former Broncos safety John Lynch in his new role as 49ers general manager.

And just like it wasn't much of a shock that Mitchell, a defensive player, was the first free agent the Broncos vetted in such a public way (the dinner included defensive coordinator Joe Woods, defensive line coach Bill Kollar and defensive end Vance Walker), it was not a surprise that executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway had a specific number in mind.

And that number wasn't \$16 million for Mitchell or the \$5.5 million Mitchell is expected to earn in the first year of the deal. Elway often uses the word "value" when he talks about free agency.

Broncos president/CEO Joe Ellis recently said the Broncos were in position to "put a lot of money back into the team," but he was also quick to add that both he, and Elway, favor "a disciplined approach; you can't spend foolishly because that gets you in trouble financially, and it can divide your locker room."

That's not to say the Broncos weren't interested in Mitchell as a potential nose tackle on defense. They were, given that Kollar and Broncos coach Vance Joseph were both on the Houston Texans' staff when Mitchell was drafted by the team. And Mitchell fit the profile Elway likes in free agency -- a productive player who works with what the Broncos do, is under 30-years-old and still has some room to grow on the developmental curve.

But he didn't fit the budget. Not the overall budget, but the one for him.

There will be free agents the Broncos want in the coming weeks who they will not get in a bidding war with because they have numbers in mind with each free agent and what they're willing to spend.

And as with the case with Mitchell, it shows, at least a little, that the Broncos have needs on the defensive line they'd like to take care of, but they have bigger needs on the offensive line, and that's where the bigger checks will likely go.

John Elway can answer offseason's biggest question at scouting combine

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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Denver Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway has to pack plenty of stuff for a week in Indianapolis.

But in between any notes he has about the prospects he'll see or his plans to meet with agents about potential free agents or even what he thinks of his own contract negotiations, if he speaks his mind Wednesday he could essentially frame plenty of the offseason discussion about the Broncos, the league, quarterbacks, free agency and the draft.

So, no big deal there.

Because if Elway uncorks an answer Wednesday to the Tony Romo Question -- a real answer -- he could take his team off the rumor mill or crank it up to Defcon 1. It's his choice.

If Elway takes a pass and simply delivers a "we-look-at-everything" response, he keeps the conversation going. Maybe that's what he wants.

But inside and outside of Denver, folks who like to spend an NFL's offseason talking about what the next football year will look like have made the Broncos one of "the best fits" for Romo. Though the Dallas Cowboys haven't released Romo -- and there are those within the Cowboys organization who want the team to keep Romo at least through the draft to see if the team can trade him -- he has been a focal point of almost any conversation about the Broncos that doesn't include anyone from the Broncos.

That's despite Broncos coach Vance Joseph having offered this when asked if he was committed to Trevor Siemian or Paxton Lynch being the team's quarterback in 2017:

"Absolutely, I am. They're both smart guys. Obviously different skill sets, but I'm committed to both of those kids. They're good football players and we've got to build around those guys. That's going to help those guys play better. Obviously up front, protecting those guys better, helping them play better."

And this is what offensive coordinator Mike McCoy has said.

"We have two talented players, and we're going to play the best guy. We're going to let them come in and compete and go from there."

Pretty emphatic to be sure that it's all about Siemian and Lynch. But this is the Broncos, after all, and nobody has any question about who makes the final calls on the football side, and that's Elway.

And on the subject of quarterbacks, Elway has, when asked of the plan is proceed with the two young quarterbacks or add a veteran to the mix, put it like this:

"Right now, we're going forward, but we always look at everything. As I said earlier, we're excited about the two young guys that we've got and their ability to get better. We have to get better around them; there's no question."

And he's added:

"I'm excited about the quarterbacks that we have. I think we're in a much better position now than we were, maybe not at the end of last year when Brock (Osweiler) left and went to Houston. I'm excited about that position. Last year it was the biggest concern. This year it is not. I think that we have two young guys that have a lot of talent, have a lot to work with and are both competitive and both want to win. The competition that we're going to have between those two is only going to make them both better. I feel pretty good about where we are at that position."

Now, because Elway rarely slams a door on a choice, some have latched on to things like "right now" or his usual "we look at everything." But the Broncos have given no indications so far that their plan is anything but starting Siemian or Lynch next season.

Wednesday afternoon in Indianapolis, Elway will have an opportunity to frame it any way he wishes. Maybe he doesn't care about the swirl that follows his team, maybe he does.

But he will have a choice at the combine. So, however the mood strikes him, he can set it all straight for all involved, including his two young quarterbacks, who believe at the moment they are competing for the job because that's what they've been told.

NFL Combine stories to watch: Here's 7, starting with Broncos, of course

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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The sweatsuit gave him away. Standing at baggage claim after Tuesday's flight on Southwest Airlines, receiver Jalen Robinette stood tall in his Air Force gear. Sticking out remains the goal of the 330 players attending the NFL Combine this week at Lucas Oil Stadium.

"I have been balancing school and training," said the 6-foot-3, 220-pounder who averaged 27.4 yards per catch last season. "I am excited to get out there."

Robinette represents one of nine local players attending, including four from the University of Colorado. The combine attracts executives, coaches, scouts and media, allowing for a personal look at players to see if the measurables reconcile with the game film. Teams can conduct 15-minute interviews with prospects to glean more about their character and work ethic. Max Garcia wowed the Broncos, leading to his selection two years ago. And don't forget about the medicals. This is where players stand to lose money if concerns surface about a recovery or the severity of an existing injury.

In the end, simplicity returns. Teams need players. The draft provides them. In his seventh go-around, this might be general manager John Elway's most important selection process. The Broncos own 10 picks and are looking to address multiple needs. Let's start there as I tackle the top Denver7 storylines of the combine.

1) Where should Broncos go with 20th overall selection?

Depending how free agency shakes out, the Broncos could go with an offensive tackle -- possibly two depending on if they decide to keep Donald Stephenson. Given his low salary of \$4 million, he might survive, though there is no guarantee. This draft, frankly, is not stocked with plug-and-play tackles. As NFL Network analyst Mike Mayock said this week, "A bunch of offensive tackles the last six-to-seven years have been busts or struggled." Wisconsin's Ryan Ramczyk is a power blocker, but his health is a question. Utah's Garrett Bolles features freakish athleticism, though it cannot mask his raw technique. Elway's best picks share a common thread: they were the best players available. Could that be versatile Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey, Florida defensive end Caleb Brantley or tight end O.J. Howard this year? The Broncos need impact from their first pick after their top two picks a year ago provided little boost. I wouldn't mind linebacker Zach Cunningham as a sleeper pick in the second or third round.

2) Who is the top quarterback?

Clemson's Deshaun Watson brings experience and a national championship. There was a time that is all a top quarterback needed. Spread offenses have changed everything, leaving teams worried about the transition to the NFL. The Broncos lived it last season with Paxton Lynch, who became a developmental project from his footwork to huddling and calling plays. DeShone Kizer is an elite talent, but lacks

experience. North Carolina's Mitch Trubisky looks the part, however, the NFL is traditionally unkind to one-year college starters. The sleeper? Texas Tech's Patrick Mahomes.

3) Cornering the market

The draft bursts with defensive talent. And if there is a safe pick, cornerback could be it. No one will be surprised if three starters go in the first round, beginning with Ohio State's Marshon Lattimore, Florida's Teez Tabor, Alabama's Marlon Humphrey and Sidney Jones of Washington. It is a passing league. Covering premium receivers remains paramount.

4) Run for cover

McCaffrey creates buzz every time his name is mentioned in connection with the Broncos. Is he a reach at 20th overall? If not used as a Swiss Army knife, yes. After teams drafted zero running backs in the first round in 2013 and 2014, the trend changed. Over the last two years Melvin Gordon, Todd Gurley and Ezekiel Elliott went early and paid off. This season includes Leonard Fournette, the LSU bruiser, Florida State's Dalvin Cook and McCaffrey. I believe all three will go on the draft's first day.

5) Tight fit

This represents a good draft for the Broncos to land another tight end. A battery of potential candidates exists. If Howard is not the choice in round one, Denver could find a fit with Miami's David Njoku and Mississippi's Evan Engram.

6) 40 Shades of Speed

Speed never has a bad day. It creates space, separation, and let's be honest, it's fun to watch guys eat up chunks of ground. Legendary Cleveland Browns coach Paul Brown is considered the first to use the 40-yard distance as a barometer to measure players on punt coverage in the 1940s and 1950s. The Dallas Cowboys made the test more valuable in 1960 under general manager Tex Schramm and personnel chief Gil Brandt. The Browns used the test on players on their roster.

"We used it before we got the player," Brandt told me. "We were trying to make a better draft pick."

Running back Chris Johnson turned in the fastest official combine time with a 4.24 in 2008. Hall of Famer Deion Sanders clocked a 4.27 without stretching after walking from a limo into the stadium.

7) Sleeper pick

The combine offers a chance for a player to rush up the draft board. It's not as common as before; teams are no longer fooled by combine stars like pass rusher Mike Mamula, who was better in drills than games for the Eagles. Still, the opportunity exists to open eyes, just as defensive back Byron Jones did when he turned in a 44.5-inch vertical leap.

David Ramsey: Adrian Peterson could revive Broncos stumbling offense

By David Ramsey
Colorado Springs Gazette
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Adrian Peterson is a worthy risk for the Denver Broncos.

Yes, he might remain the broken-down runner we glimpsed in 2016, when he rushed for 72 yards and 1.9 yards per carry while struggling with knee trouble.

But ...

He might return to the Peterson of 2015, when he rushed for 1,485 yards, averaged 4.5 yards per carry and looked ready to punish NFL defenses until he was 35.

The Vikings have announced they will not pick up the option on Peterson's massive contract, one that would have required the Vikes to pay him \$18 million for 2017. He's expected to become a free agent March 9.

Peterson turns 32 on March 21. He's not a long-term solution to the multitude of woes that plague the Broncos offense.

He could be a solution for 2017. He could, if he can regain his powers, bust past the 1,000-yard barrier and revive the Broncos barely breathing run game.

In my view, Peterson has grown from his inexcusable personal behavior. He beat his 4-year-old son with a switch, earning him a deserved suspension. He's served his time, learned a desperately needed lesson.

It's fashionable to blame almost all of the Broncos 2016 offensive troubles on the line, which was confused and confusing.

The runners deserve a big chunk of the blame. When C.J. Anderson departed after an injury, his replacements showed little imagination or power or gusto. Devontae Booker, Justin Forsett and Kapri Bibbs almost never rose above mediocrity.

Anderson is, as always, more of a question mark than an exclamation mark. He's been consistently inconsistent, the only constant is his tendency to suffer injury. He's shown flashes, but he's never shown the ability to sustain those flashes.

The Broncos are currently wavering. The defense remains violent and sinister and powerful. The offense is crumbling.

If John Elway can persuade Peterson to sign an incentive-laden contract, the Broncos should take the plunge. An incentive-laden contract would hand the running back big money if he excels, but little cash if it turns out his days as an elite back have ended.

This persuasion is unlikely. Peterson - a native of Palestine, Texas, near Houston -has let it be known that he's interested in playing for the Texans, Cowboys, Cardinals, Giants and Chargers. He's even interested in wearing the silver and black of the Raiders. He has not mentioned the Broncos.

Yes, it's a risk. Peterson could be finished as a superlative runner who brought back memories of Barry Sanders and Jim Brown.

But there's a recent example that we all remember of a worthy risk.

In 2012, when you looked at Peyton Manning from a certain angle, he looked done, too. He had endured repeated surgeries on his neck. There were questions about his arm strength.

He had defined the Colts for more than a decade, and the Colts axed him.

Peterson defined the Vikings, good and bad, for a decade. Now, player and team are waving goodbye to each other.

The Broncos should pursue one of the greatest running backs in NFL history.

NFL prospects have been prepping for this big week

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

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The 330 players arriving at the league's annual combine have been preparing for this week's "Underwear Olympics" like a prize fighter gets ready for his big night, pumping iron and cutting carbs.

They've been following strict programs designed to help them get stronger, run faster and jump higher in anticipation of getting poked and prodded, measured and treasured.

"The hardest thing for these kids to really understand when they get to the combine and the pro day is they get one shot at all these drills," said Loren Landow, who trained Stanford star Christian McCaffrey among more than two dozen NFL hopefuls at Landow Performance in suburban Denver over the last two months.

"Whereas your strength coach in college used to let you do it over and over until you got your best time, now that's not the case when you're being evaluated in a time crunch," Landow said. "They're going to give you one opportunity and it's all about how well you perform at that moment with high levels of stress and some fatigue on you."

That's why they've been training with such single-minded focus since their bowl games.

"It's a lot of just trying to improve all the funky drills that they have you doing at the combine that you know aren't necessarily things that we practice as a football player on a daily basis," said Wyoming offensive lineman Chase Roullier, who trained with Landow.

That's been the formula ever since Mike Mamula absolutely killed it at the 1995 combine and rocketed into the first round, where the Philadelphia Eagles traded the 12th overall pick and two second-round selections to Tampa Bay so they could move up five spots and get the Boston College defensive end at No. 7.

Mamula was among the first players to train specifically for the tests he'd face at the combine: the 40-yard dash, the three-cone drill that measures agility and the 225-pound bench press.

Now everybody targets this week in Indy like Mamula did all those years ago.

Today's prospects train six days a week for eight weeks or more all so they can impress NFL executives who will test their speed, strength, skills and brain power while also checking out their medical background and any off-field history for any red flags.

"I feel like it's definitely getting us ready for the combine as far as all the guys we're competing against each other," said Air Force receiver Jalen Robinette, who led the nation in yards per catch in 2016. "Because it's a real big interview/competition there at the combine. And being able to break down the drills and mentally be practicing everything, it's awesome. Literally every day I hear new stuff about the combine that they teach me here."

"Preparation is everything."

They pretty much follow the same basic program because they'll be doing the same tests at the combine. But the training is also personalized by position.

"I'll talk to the agents and from the agents' perspective, I'll say, 'What are the scouts telling you that they want to see from your player? Do they want to see them heavier, lighter?'" Landow said. "At the end of the day, I don't think you ever go wrong in providing a little bit more mobility, flexibility to an athlete and getting them stronger. More explosive is always the key in this short window so they can really show their best in all their 'measurables.'"

These players have all undergone mock combines, too, where they put all their training together for dry runs to give them a taste of what this week will bring.

"I think it makes the hugest difference," Roullier said. "If I were to go in there and do this stuff cold, I mean, I'd have an idea of what I'd be doing because it's all stuff that I've done in the past. But my technique would be just awful, you know, it's just all these little things that you need to change and I'm able to get coached up on all of them. It's just continuing to improve those little things and it makes a huge difference in the numbers."

This training isn't cheap. It can cost tens of thousands of dollars, although the pricing structure changes for draft wannabes and sure bets.

"If an athlete is an NFL combine invite, the agent will pay for everything," Landow said. "If you have a kid who may be a bubble guy who didn't get the combine invite but you know can play, the agents will typically foot the bill. Some guys if they're a priority free agent maybe at best, sometimes it's coming out of their own pocket."

For a combine invitee, the cost can run into the tens of thousands of dollars.

"I know with housing and food and all that it ends up being like 10, 20 grand that my agent's dropping just in these few months up to the combine. So, it's a lot," said Roullier, who's out to ensure this week that the training pays big dividends.

NFL teams get jump start on franchise tags

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

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Le'Veon Bell, Chandler Jones, Melvin Ingram and Kawann Short didn't have to wait until Wednesday's deadline to get franchise tagged.

And a person with knowledge of the details said the New York Giants have told defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul that he, too, will get the franchise tag. The person with direct knowledge of the move spoke on condition of anonymity because the Giants didn't announce the decision.

The Giants have to designate Pierre-Paul a franchise player by 4 p.m. ET on Wednesday. He will earn roughly \$17 million this season unless the team reaches a long-term agreement by July 15.

The Steelers placed their exclusive rights franchise tag Bell on Monday, the same day the Panthers, Cardinals and Giants applied their non-exclusive franchise tags to keep their stars from becoming free agents.

This buys the teams and players until mid-July to reach agreement on new long-term contracts.

Otherwise, they'll play on one-year deals and make the average of the top five players at their position in 2017.

While only the Steelers can negotiate with Bell, other teams can negotiate with Pierre-Paul, Short and Jones. However, the compensation required — two first-round draft picks — is a strong deterrent.

The biggest superstar to get franchise tagged last year was linebacker Von Miller, who received the exclusive rights franchise tag from the Broncos shortly after his MVP performance in Super Bowl 50.

That set up a stalemate that often turned contentious until the sides agreed to a record-shattering deal at the deadline that was worth \$114.5 million over six seasons and included more guaranteed money — \$70 million — than any non-quarterback in NFL history.

The newly franchise-tagged players could make similar big splashes at their positions — or could find themselves playing on one-year franchise tenders instead.

BELL COW : Bell was the first player in NFL history to average 100 yards rushing and 50 yards receiving in 2016. Pittsburgh general manager Kevin Colbert said earlier this month the Steelers intend to keep Bell in black and yellow indefinitely. If the sides don't agree on a long-term deal Bell's salary for 2017 would likely top \$12 million.

A long-term deal for the 25-year-old running back isn't without risk, however. Twice suspended for violating the league's drug policy, Bell has been unable to finish the Steelers' final game in each of the past three seasons because of injuries.

GETTING DEFENSIVE : The Panthers' tag of Short, worth about \$15 million, is the latest move to keep their defensive line together. They also re-signed defensive end Wes Horton to a two-year deal Monday, a day after re-signing defensive end Mario Addison to a three-year contract.

All three were set for free agency.

A four-year NFL veteran, Short has 17 sacks in the past two seasons, third-most among defensive tackles.

DYNAMIC DUO : The Chargers likely kept their dynamic pass-rushing duo intact by applying the non-exclusive tag to Ingram.

The fifth-year pro has 18 1/2 sacks over the past two seasons with the Chargers, including eight last year. He teamed with rookie defensive end Joey Bosa to cause trouble for quarterbacks last season, and the pass-rushing stars could be even more effective next year when the Chargers move to a 4-3 defensive front.

The Chargers used the franchise tag for only the seventh time in team history, and for the first time since San Diego retained receiver Vincent Jackson in 2011.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY : The Cardinals' tag of Jones came on his 27th birthday and was hardly a surprise.

Acquired in a trade with New England a year ago, Jones had 11 sacks, four forced fumbles, two fumble recoveries and 15 tackles for loss last season. He has 25½ sacks over the past two seasons.

Jones immediately upgraded what had been an average Cardinals pass rush at best. His fellow outside linebacker Markus Golden had 12½ sacks and seven tackles for loss. Together they form one of the better outside pass rush combinations in the NFL.

JPP DEJA VU : This is the second time the Giants have used their franchise tag on Pierre-Paul.

Pierre-Paul had a comeback season in 2016, recording seven sacks and 53 tackles. He also had eight passes defended, forced three fumbles and recovered one and returned it 43 yards for a touchdown. He missed the final four regular-season games and a playoff matchup against Green Bay with a sports hernia.

Pierre-Paul missed the opening half of the 2015 season because of a severe hand injury sustained in a fireworks accident on July 4.

NFL looking at retooling rules on celebration penalties

By Tom Pelissero

USA Today

March 1, 2017

When NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell appeared in a Super Bowl-week skit with comedian Keegan-Michael Key about excessive celebration, it might have been a sign the league is open to doing more than getting in on the joke.

The NFL's competition committee has discussed the league's celebration rules during its annual meetings at the scouting combine – a conversation that's slated to continue Wednesday during a joint session that includes current and former players as well as representatives from the NFL Players Association, people with knowledge of the meetings told USA TODAY Sports.

And there is a strong sense that changes are coming to clarify the rules, focusing in part on the duration of some acts, which could ease pressure on officials to over-enforce and reverse the surge in celebration fouls that brought a fresh round of complaints last season about the "No Fun League."

There were 30 so-called "demonstration" penalties in 2016 – up from 29 over the previous two seasons combined and just five in 2013, according to data compiled by the NFL and obtained by USA TODAY Sports.

In a meeting here Monday, the competition committee watched video of roughly 40 celebrations that drew fines last season, said one of the people, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the issue remains under discussion. Though there was not consensus on all the celebrations, those that were prolonged remain a problem for the committee, in addition to obvious no-nos of mimicking weapons or sex acts according to multiple people in the Monday meeting.

Goodell made clear unsportsmanlike conduct was an area of emphasis last season, pushing for a rule (approved as a one-year experiment) that automatically ejected a player for two such violations. As one of the people explained, the intention wasn't to ramp up flags for celebrations, but officials erred on the conservative side. That pattern, combined with players continuing to push the limits, contributed to the escalation in celebration infractions.

Scott Green, the former NFL referee who is now executive director of the NFL Referees Association, acknowledged during Super Bowl week that it's "getting kind of hard sometimes to determine" what exactly the league wants called. Officials want the rules clearly defined, but would really prefer the NFL enforce the rules through fines rather than flags.

"Got to give guys credit – they're pretty creative," Green told USA TODAY Sports. "They take it right to the line, and then maybe they go over or they don't. We would love as a group not to be dealing with celebration issues. But that's part of our jurisdiction, and unfortunately, we look like the bad guys when we throw the foul after a guy goes 90 yards for the touchdown."

Clarifications to the existing rules – which outlaw a list that includes, but is not limited to, throat slash, machine-gun salute, sexually suggestive gestures, prolonged gyrations and stomping on a team logo – would not necessarily require a vote by the membership.

Goodell and other league officials have long cited the need to keep tensions from escalating as reason for making stricter celebration rules. But last season featured flags for, among other things, doing snow angels, hugging an official, shooting the ball like a basketball, jumping into an oversized Salvation Army bucket and a variety of quasi-choreographed dances.

In the social media age, originality quite literally pays. Viral video clips can mean endorsement dollars. So, while certain types of celebrations won't ever gain approval, escalating the war on fun makes little sense, especially as the NFL ponders its early-season ratings dip and tries to find ways to keep reaching a younger generation.

That Goodell played along in the skit with Key and Denver Broncos linebacker Von Miller – who has borrowed the forbidden celebration of Key's "Hingle McCringleberry" character and been fined for it – seemed to signal a shift in tone. Key even dressed as the fictional player while hosting the NFL Honors event Feb. 4, showed video of one of Pittsburgh Steelers receiver Antonio Brown's penalized dances and presented himself an award for excessive celebration, all with Goodell looking on from the audience.

At his Super Bowl media conference, Goodell laughed at a question about whether the NFL could clarify its celebration rules, perhaps instituting an actual "two-pump limit," as referenced in Key's sketch. He also said the one-year experiment with ejecting a player who commits two unsportsmanlike conduct penalties – including celebration fouls – "seems to be a very positive thing" that may become permanent.

Agent's Take: Tony Romo can get paid like a quality QB with a low cap number in 2017

By Joel Corry
CBSSports.com
March 1, 2017

The likelihood of star NFL players changing teams has increased dramatically since the advent of unrestricted free agency and the salary cap. Despite this reality, high-caliber veteran quarterbacks don't switch teams with the same frequency as players at other positions. Tom Brady, Eli Manning, Philip Rivers, Ben Roethlisberger and Aaron Rodgers are still with their original teams more than a decade after entering the NFL.

Tony Romo seemed destined to spend his entire career with the Cowboys before he fractured a vertebra in his back during Dallas' third preseason game. The injury changed Romo's career trajectory. He lost his nearly decade-long stranglehold on the Cowboys starting quarterback job to Dak Prescott, the eventual 2016 Offensive Rookie of the Year, while sidelined several weeks recovering from the back injury.

It's no longer a matter of if Romo will be in a different uniform next season. Where Romo lands and whether he plays at a discounted rate is one of the NFL's biggest offseason storylines.

Romo hoping for release

Romo's preference of Dallas releasing him so he can choose his next destination appears to be more likely than a trade, which can't occur until the 2017 league year begins March 9. The Cowboys might not be able to get more than a mid-round draft pick for Romo, who turns 37 in April, given his age and injury history.

The Packers received a conditional 2009 fourth-round pick that ultimately was a third-round pick from the Jets in a 2008 trade for a soon-to-be 39-year-old Brett Favre. This compensation had the potential to become as much as a first-round pick depending on the Jets and Favre's performance in 2008. Favre was coming off of a 2007 season in which he led Green Bay to the NFC Championship Game and was named an All-Pro.

Romo has the NFL's largest 2017 salary cap number at \$24.7 million on a \$14 million base salary next season. He is scheduled to make \$19.5 million and \$20.5 million in 2018 and '19, which are the last two years of his contract. These three years don't contain any salary guarantees.

Any team interested in dealing for Romo must have enough salary cap room to absorb his \$14 million 2017 salary in order to make a trade. Once acquired, the new team can renegotiate or restructure Romo's contract to decrease his \$14 million cap number and/or salary.

The Cowboys will have a \$19.6 million salary cap charge for Romo relating to the bonus proration in his 2013 extension and subsequent contract restructurings for cap purposes in 2014 and '15 regardless of

the nature and timing of his departure. This cap charge for a player no longer on a team's roster is commonly referred to as dead money.

The entire \$19.6 million will be on Dallas' books if Romo is released or traded before June 2. A total of \$5.1 million of cap room will be gained immediately. Romo's \$25.2 million and \$23.7 million cap numbers for 2018 and '19 will be wiped away with the roster move in one of these manners.

The cap hit will be taken over 2017 and '18 with either transaction occurring after June 1 or releasing Romo with a post-June 1 designation, which can't be used until March 9 after the new league year starts. NFL teams can release two players each year before June 1 that will be treated under the cap as if they were released after June 1.

With a post-June 1 designation, a team is required to carry the player's full cap number (\$24.7 million for Romo) until June 2 even though he is no longer a part of the roster. The player's salary, \$14 million in Romo's case, comes off the books at that time unless it is guaranteed. Dallas will have \$10.7 million of dead money in 2017, which will free up \$14 million of cap space. Romo remains on Dallas' books in 2018 with an \$8.9 million cap charge.

Veteran quarterback dynamics

There's a strong belief publicly that if released Romo should be willing to play the remainder of his career significantly below the going rate of veteran starting quarterbacks, particularly with a potential Super Bowl contender, because of durability concerns and his substantial career earnings. The insight I gained into the player's mindset during my numerous years as an agent suggests that it won't happen unless absolutely necessary. Players typically think they are worth their contracts after being let go. An agent usually attempts to get the money his client was scheduled to make from a new team on better terms than in the old contract or in some instances a pay raise when a player is released.

Romo's remaining contract of \$54 million over three years is reasonable for a healthy starting quarterback. In 2016, the average yearly salary for a starting quarterback on a veteran contract was just above \$19.475 million, which is close to a 13 percent increase from 2015's \$17,283,333 number. This figure is expected to go up for 2017 with Derek Carr, Kirk Cousins, Matt Ryan and Matthew Stafford potentially receiving long-term contracts that should exceed Andrew Luck's \$24.594 million per year, which makes him the NFL's highest-paid player.

Outside of Tom Brady, veteran quarterbacks with considerable career earnings aren't in the habit of leaving money on the table. Drew Brees and Carson Palmer established the market for older veteran quarterbacks last year with one-year extensions with the Saints and Cardinals worth \$24.25 million and \$21 million, respectively. Both players are older than Romo. Brees and Palmer had also made several million more than Romo's during their careers when signing their new deals. Manning, Rivers and Roethlisberger had comparable career earnings to Romo's, which exceed \$125 million, prior to signing extensions in 2015 that made them among the league's highest paid players.

Favored destinations

Bovada, a popular online sportsbook, posted odds last week for where Romo will be playing next season. The Broncos are the favorites with 3-1 odds. The Chiefs and Texans have the next best odds at 7-2 and 5-1.

These three teams should have the most appeal to Romo. They are ready-made teams that could be legitimate Super Bowl contenders with better quarterback play.

Romo would be an attempt for Denver to replicate the success recently experienced with an older quarterback that had an injury history, Peyton Manning, particularly if Romo can perform like he did in 2014 when he was last healthy. Romo was a second team All-Pro in 2014 when he led the NFL with a 113.2 passing rating and 69.9 completion percentage.

Denver is in the best position from a salary cap standpoint. The financial investment at quarterback is extremely modest. 2016 starter Trevor Siemian is making \$615,000 on a \$628,196 salary cap number next season. 2016 first-round pick Paxton Lynch's 2017 salary cap number is a little above \$2.15 million.

Denver must address the offensive line regardless of the quarterback but especially if Romo is signed. Romo has had a difficult time staying healthy the last couple of years in Dallas behind arguably the NFL's best offensive line. In Pro Football Focus' (PFF) 2016 season ending offensive line rankings, Denver's was 24th.

Alex Smith has taken the Chiefs to the playoffs in three of his four seasons in Kansas City. He has a 1-3 playoff record and hasn't gotten the Chiefs past the divisional round of the playoffs. Coach Andy Reid recently reiterated his confidence in Smith despite the growing sentiment that the Chiefs have reached their ceiling with him under center.

The Chiefs have one of the NFL's most challenging salary cap situations for next season with about \$2 million of cap space once factoring in tenders for restricted free agents and exclusive rights players, assuming the 2017 salary cap is at \$168 million. The NFL's preliminary projections put the salary cap between \$166 million and \$170 million.

Should Reid have a change of heart, \$9.7 million of cap room will be gained by removing Smith's \$16.9 million cap number and next season's non-guaranteed \$13.3 million salary from the equation through a trade or release. A short-term Romo deal could be easily structured with a 2017 cap number significantly less than Smith's cap savings.

The Texans gave Brock Osweiler a four-year, \$72 million contract containing \$37 million fully guaranteed at the start of free agency last year after just seven career starts. He was supposed to be a significant upgrade at quarterback over the much-maligned Brian Hoyer. Instead, the Texans defended their AFC South title last season on the strength of the NFL's top-ranked defense and in spite of the big money free agent.

Osweiler ranked near the bottom in a majority of major statistical categories in 2016 before losing his starting job to Tom Savage when he was pulled from Week 15's contest against the Jaguars. Savage suffering a concussion paved the way for Osweiler to return to the lineup in time for the playoffs.

The Texans can't realistically move on from Osweiler next season because his \$16 million 2017 base salary is fully guaranteed. Osweiler's dismal play and the guarantee have destroyed his trade value. His 2017 salary cap number is \$19 million. Houston would have a \$25 million cap charge by releasing Osweiler. This is because of the guarantee and \$6 million of signing bonus proration from his 2018 and 2019 contract years immediately hitting Houston's books.

It isn't helpful for Houston to prevent the future bonus proration from accelerating onto the 2017 salary cap by waiting until June 2 to release Osweiler or giving him a post-June 1 designation. There would still be a \$19 million salary cap charge next year, which is the same as his 2017 cap number, under these circumstances.

The Texans can get rid of Osweiler after the 2017 season when there are no longer salary guarantees in his contract. There will be \$6 million of dead money by cutting Osweiler in 2018.

The Chiefs and Texans can only realistically obtain Romo if his deal has a low 2017 salary cap number. Romo's 2017 cap number is less of a concern for the Broncos since they are expected to have over \$40 million of cap room.

How Romo gets paid on a low 2017 cap number

It wouldn't be a surprise if Romo sought a contract where his compensation is the same ballpark as other quality starting quarterbacks provided he stays healthy. This type of deal could look like the following:

Guaranteed money: \$20 million

Contract length: Three years (2020 voids)

Average per year: \$18 million

Deal total: \$54 million

Maximum value: \$66 million

Year	Base salary	Roster bonus	Roster bonus per game	Bonus proration	Salary cap number
2017	\$1,000,000	\$11,000,000	\$2,000,000	\$2,750,000	\$4,625,000
	Roster bonus, base salary fully guaranteed (skill, injury & salary cap) Roster bonus is earned 3 days after signing				
2018	\$18,000,000		\$2,000,000	\$2,750,000	\$22,750,000
	\$6 million fully guaranteed; remaining \$12 million is fully guaranteed if any 2017 incentives are earned				
2019	\$18,000,000		\$2,000,000	\$2,750,000	\$22,750,000
2020	\$25,000,000			\$2,750,000	\$27,750,000
	2020 contract year automatically voids 5 days before 2020 league year starts				

Individual incentives (2017 only) -- \$3 million

\$1.5 million for at least 90 percent offensive playtime

\$500,000 for 4,000 or more passing yards

\$500,000 for a passer rating of at least 100 (minimum of 224 pass attempts)

\$500,000 for 30 or more touchdown passes

Team incentives (annual) -- \$3 million

\$500,000 for a playoff win & at least 50 percent regular season offensive playtime

\$750,000 for a conference championship appearance & at least 50 percent regular season offensive playtime

\$750,000 for a Super Bowl appearance & at least 50 percent regular season offensive playtime

\$1 million for a Super Bowl win & at least 50 percent regular season offensive playtime

Making sense of the suggested contract

A significant portion of Romo's 2017 compensation will need to be prorated over the length of the deal in order to be cap friendly initially. A voidable 2020 contract year was added to make Romo's 2017 cap number more team friendly. This is usually accomplished with a signing bonus. Romo has a fully guaranteed roster bonus instead to allow him to retire after the 2017 season without the team being able to recover money from him. The team would have the right to recoup the \$8.25 million prorated over the last three years if signing bonus. This same type of team right doesn't exist with a roster bonus.

Romo can make the same \$14 million as in his current contract by remaining on the field all season. The per game roster bonus in 2017 and the other years provide the team some financial and cap relief with injuries. The per game amount is only payable if a player is on the 46-man active roster for that particular game. For example, Colin Kaepernick had \$2 million roster bonuses (\$125,000 per game) in most years of his 2014 extension. When he went on injured reserved in 2015 after nine games, he lost out on \$875,000 of this \$2 million.

Only \$875,000, seven games worth of the roster bonus, would count against the cap at signing because that's how many games Romo was active for in 2016. The team would incur a \$125,000 cap charge for each game Romo is on the 46-man roster beginning with his eighth game. The reverse would also be true. There would be \$125,000 credit cap for each game if Romo wasn't active at least seven times during the 2017 season.

Romo has the opportunity for his 2017 compensation to be on par with 2016 veteran starting quarterbacks with individual and team success through incentives. The contract could be worth as much as \$66 million over the three years by consistently leading his new team to the highest level. The deal is

essentially a two-year commitment because of the \$6 million salary guarantee. There would be \$14.25 million of dead money by releasing Romo after just one season.

Any 2017 incentives with higher thresholds than Romo's 2016 individual statistical achievements would be classified as not likely to be earned (NLTBE) incentives during the season. Romo has absurdly low NLTBE thresholds for next season because he only threw four passes for 29 yards and one touchdown while only taking seven of Dallas' 1,058 offensive snaps in 2016. The team achievements would also qualify as NLTBE since they are being paired with Romo's playtime. Earned incentives wouldn't hit the team's salary cap until after the season ended and would be deducted from 2018 cap room if necessary.

The individual categories were taken from the incentives and salary escalators in Robert Griffin III and Tyrod Taylor's contracts, which are on the lower end for starting quarterbacks. The actual thresholds approximate the average 2016 statistical performance of the six quarterbacks (Brady, Carr, Prescott, Rodgers, Roethlisberger and Ryan) originally selected to last season's Pro Bowl. The six completed 66.4 percent of their passes for an average of slightly over 4,050 passing yards with 31 touchdown passes and just under seven interceptions to post a 104.8 passer rating while playing in approximately 15 games with 90.4 percent playing time.

The team incentives were based on Sam Bradford and Ryan Fitzpatrick's contracts. Bradford's two-year, \$35 million contract containing \$22 million fully guaranteed has \$2 million of annual incentives tied to team success. The amount ranges from \$250,000 for the Vikings winning a wild-card game where he takes at least 50 percent of Minnesota's offensive snaps to \$2 million for a Super Bowl win with the same playtime requirement. Fitzpatrick's one-year deal for \$12 million had \$500,000 for a playoff win with 50 percent or more offensive playtime in that game, \$1.5 million for making the conference championship game with at least 50 percent offensive playtime during the regular season or \$3 million for a Super Bowl appearance with the same regular-season playtime requirement as the conference championship game appearance.

Final thoughts

More contract flexibility by Romo may be required with the Broncos if KUSA's Mike Klis' report of Denver being interested as long as the price tag doesn't reach the \$13 million-per-year neighborhood. Broncos general manager and executive vice president of football operations John Elway had discussions with the 49ers prior to last year's NFL Draft about acquiring a disgruntled Kaepernick. The quarterback's unwillingness to take a significant pay cut to the \$7 million range prevented the trade from happening. Presumably, the more of a discount Romo is willing to take, the easier any incentives should be to make with a higher overall amount that can be earned.

The Bears, who have Bovada's fifth-best odds at 15-2, aren't nearly as ready made as the other three teams after going 3-13 in 2016. Parting ways with quarterback Jay Cutler will give the Bears over \$60 million in cap space to remake the roster. Chicago's cap room will exceed \$70 million if outside linebacker Lamarr Houston and wide receiver Eddie Royal are released. General manager Ryan Pace, who was a college teammate of Romo's at Eastern Illinois, and coach John Fox may be most willing to

meet the four-time Pro Bowler's contract demands because their jobs could be in jeopardy with a third straight losing season in which the Bears are last in NFC North.

Report: Denver Broncos are in 'driver's seat' to land Tony Romo

By Des Bieler
Washington Post
March 1, 2017

Tony Romo's days as a Dallas Cowboy appear to be dwindling, leading to speculation about which team might land the veteran quarterback's services. According to a report Tuesday, the Broncos are the front-runners to sign Romo, as long as they can agree on compensation.

Denver is "clearly in the driver's seat in the potential Tony Romo free agent sweepstakes," NFL Network's Ian Rapoport said. He added that Romo would need to be "willing to take a pay cut" from the \$14 million base salary he is set to receive in 2017 (per Spotrac).

Rapoport said that, for salary cap reasons, the Cowboys won't cut Romo before March 9, when the NFL begins its next league year and free agency opens. At that point, or shortly thereafter, it is looking increasingly likely that Dallas will part ways with the quarterback who arrived as an undrafted free agent in 2004 and was its primary starter from 2006 through 2015.

Of a sit-down between Cowboys management and Romo, Stephen Jones, the team's executive vice president and son of owner Jerry Jones, said (via dallascowboys.com), "Yeah, I would say it's going to come. I think Jerry's going to be due to meet with him sooner than later."

Jerry Jones is close with Romo, a four-time Pro Bowler who is the franchise leader in passing yards (34,183) and touchdowns (248). Over the past two seasons, however, injuries have hindered Romo, who turns 34 in April, and he lost his starting job to rookie Dak Prescott last year.

According to Rapoport's scenario, Romo may have to choose in free agency between his biggest payday and the best situation in which to chase his first NFL title. The Broncos won the Super Bowl with Peyton Manning in 2016, but following his retirement, they slumped to 9-7 last season and missed the playoffs.

Denver spent a first-round pick on Paxton Lynch but gave most of the starts to another inexperienced quarterback, Trevor Siemian. Both performed reasonably well relative to expectations, and team President John Elway is reportedly willing to let that duo battle for the starting job this season. But Elway also would likely be intrigued at the possibility of maximizing his team's championship window by bringing in Romo.

Rapoport referred to a recent Kansas City Star article in which Chiefs owner Clark Hunt said that Alex Smith would remain that team's starting quarterback. With Carson Palmer returning to the Cardinals, it appears that Romo won't have many desirable destinations, although the Texans remain a possibility, increasing the likelihood that he could come to an agreement with the Broncos.

In the meantime, the Cowboys sound like a team preparing to say goodbye to Romo. "What he's done for this franchise just speaks volumes for what he means to the Dallas Cowboys, to the organization, to our family," Stephen Jones said. "I mean, this guy has played tremendous football."

“He’s given us big seasons, and we’re all — I think Jerry said it best: Unfortunately, that’s one of our biggest regrets right now, is we haven’t been able to put a team around Tony, when he’s healthy, that he could win a Super Bowl.”

Three Broncos storylines to watch as the Scouting Combine begins

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
March 1, 2017

The Broncos and representatives from the other 31 teams are in central Indiana a week later than in past years, mashing the Scouting Combine and the start of the free-agent signing period together in a way not seen before on the NFL calendar.

But in a way, it's appropriate. Free agency and the draft are complements in the team-building process. If you hit on the former, you have more flexibility in the latter. If you draft well and can retain players, then your future free-agency shopping list is shorter.

As the Broncos arrive at the Combine, here are three storylines to keep an eye on:

1. FOCUS ON THE OFFENSIVE LINE

There appears to be little doubt that offensive line -- both in the free-agent and draft pool -- is a key priority for the Broncos this offseason.

NFL Network analyst Mike Mayock minced no words when he described the quality -- or lack thereof -- of this year's offensive-line class, calling it "bad," and noting that the lack of depth could push third-round-caliber prospects from previous years up a round in this year's group. That doesn't mean there aren't prospects who can help the Broncos in the short or long run.

But even the top ones have questions. For Alabama's Cam Robinson, it's a question of position -- guard or tackle? It's possible that he could follow the trajectory of Miami's Laremy Tunsil, who worked at left guard last season but looks set to move to tackle in the wake of the Branden Albert trade to Jacksonville, which is expected to be finalized when the new league year begins March 9.

Wisconsin OT Ryan Ramczyk will not work out at the Combine because of a hip injury, but he will undergo the full battery of medical evaluations from teams. The results will likely determine whether he is a first-rounder -- and maybe the first offensive lineman off the board.

Utah offensive tackle Garrett Bolles must answer questions about how quickly he can adapt; given that he will be 25 when he begins his rookie season and started just one year for the Utes, his equation for success likely requires a rapid adjustment. Meetings with teams in Indianapolis could be the biggest factor from this week's doings in determining his post-Combine draft stock.

Western Kentucky offensive lineman Forrest Lamp is arguably the most versatile player at his position group, with the ability to line up at four positions. He should draw plenty of attention at the Combine.

But the Broncos' plan up front for the draft will be affected by how they attack the first two weeks of the free-agent signing period.

2. THE DEEP TIGHT END CLASS

The point in the draft at which the Broncos select a tight end -- if they choose to add to their complement headed by Virgil Green, Jeff Heuerman and A.J. Derby -- could be determined at least in part by when the run of tight ends off the draft board takes place.

With a bumper crop of prospects whose measurables and skill sets fit the evolution of the position, it could be possible to get a Round 1-caliber talent as late as Round 3, because teams may see the glut of starting-caliber players and choose to wait. But if the dominoes at the position fall earlier, teams need to be poised to react.

Those with the most to gain are the non-Power 5 prospects -- some of whom got long looks at the Senior Bowl, where South Alabama's Gerald Everett and Toledo's Michael Roberts had some flashes of brilliance and stacked up well in the side-by-side, repetition-by-repetition comparison with Alabama's O.J. Howard, who is widely expected to be the first tight end off the board.

Drake's Eric Saubert used an impressive week at the East-West Shrine Game to jump on some radars, but needs a good Combine to back it up. But perhaps the one tight end who can strap a rocket to his draft prospects is Adam Shaheen of Division II Ashland.

The 6-foot-6, 277-pound Shaheen turned pro early, and could not participate in any all-star games, so this is his first chance to stand on equal terms with Division I prospects. If his workout backs up his impressive film, he could be off the board early on Day 2 -- and could start that aforementioned run on players at the position.

3. LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE NEXT TWO WEEKS -- AND TWO MONTHS

Not only will all team executives and coaches be at the Scouting Combine, but agents will, too. This week offers a chance for face-to-face discussions that are the genesis of deals, particularly re-signings of players.

With free agency bearing down, there is greater urgency to these conversations. Just one day after Combine workouts end March 6, the free-agency calendar begins with the legal tampering period -- during which teams can discuss contract terms with prospective free agents from other clubs, but cannot sign them.

With the Combine one week later than in previous years, the altered schedule forced teams to do all of their free-agent preparations before leaving for Indianapolis, with minimal time before the start of the new league year.

When the Broncos' brass returns to Denver, the first goal becomes to use free agency to fill any gaping holes in the starting lineup and among key rotational reserves, allowing Executive Vice President/General Manager John Elway and Broncos executives the freedom to tailor their draft plan to picking the best players on the team's board rather than reaching for need.