

# Christian McCaffrey is a star in Colorado. But he feels disrespected among RBs in 2017.

By Nicki Jhabvala

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The biggest star in Colorado has been hiding under a white hoodie and black Nike sweats at Landow Performance, a Centennial training facility a mile and a half from Broncos headquarters. A weight bench in the far corner has been his companion, along with the silence in his head that has drowned out the beats thumping through the speakers and the roar of dozens of fellow NFL prospects working out alongside him.

Surrounded by many but alone in his zone, the star filled his recent weeks in this room and on nearby fields to prepare for his next big moment, at the NFL scouting combine in Indianapolis. There, the spotlight would burn its brightest, with more eyes watching, more cameras flashing, and more critics scrutinizing his every move and every word.

Christian McCaffrey, a former Valor Christian and Stanford running back, is the latest of the McCaffrey clan to test the NFL, following the lead of his father, former Broncos wide receiver Ed McCaffrey. The son of a star who grew up around stars could be an even bigger star. With a rare combination of versatility, strength and smarts packed into his 5-foot-11, 202-pound frame, Christian could be a first-round draft selection April 27 amid a deep class of running backs.

But when he's in his head and on the field, he plays as if he's unknown. A disrespected unknown in the Class of 2017.

"I play with a chip on my shoulder always," McCaffrey said Thursday at the scouting combine. "I feel like a lot of people don't give me credit for my skills and talents. That's just the way it is. ... I'm constantly trying to prove myself."

In December, McCaffrey made the hardest decision of his career when he announced he would skip Stanford's bowl game against North Carolina to begin his combine and draft preparation. He was criticized for being selfish and disloyal to his teammates. Supporters said he was wise to protect his health and his future.

Behind closed doors, surrounded by his teammates, McCaffrey received a standing ovation.

"I have the best teammates in the whole world at Stanford, and coaches, honestly," he said. "Every single one of them supported me, had my back. I was very fortunate to have that."

But the reaction didn't stop there. NFL executives would ask — some already have — why he skipped the bowl game during their 15-minute interviews with him at the combine.

"You know what, I understand it now," said Broncos general manager John Elway, who met with McCaffrey on Wednesday. "Obviously when I thought about it, kind of the old school in me wanted to come out and say, 'Why? Why would those guys not play? It's their last game,' and this and that. But I

tell you what, when you look at where the league is now and you talk about the value of these contracts for these players coming out and the risks that they're taking, the old salty guy in me got flipped back to understanding. I understand why they didn't play."

Added 49ers GM John Lynch on Thursday: "As a Stanford fan, I wasn't a huge fan of that. ... I think you understand their perspective, but I don't necessarily think it's a positive thing for college football. This is such a team sport — I know there are people that I've talked to here that that really bothers. I'm fortunate. With one of those players, I happen to know the young man (McCaffrey). So I would never question his commitment to team, but other people will."

Understanding why requires understanding where — where McCaffrey came from and where he hopes to go.

In Colorado, where his father starred as a Bronco, McCaffrey has broken from the shadow to become arguably the state's most talented professional prospect since basketball star Chauncey Billups. His versatility and production have served him well as he shattered Stanford and NCAA records in rushing and all-purpose yards, and was the Heisman Trophy runner-up as a sophomore in 2015.

But with his name and success have come expectations and even a renewal of a stereotype as the white running back. And doing many things well has created even more questions, about fit, and how his skills translate to the pro level.

"From my perspective, McCaffrey's a matchup guy," NFL Network draft expert Mike Mayock said. "He's a chess piece. He averaged ... between 6 and 6.5 yards a carry. He's an outstanding pass catcher. He's bigger and tougher than people think he is. And he's also a return guy. So you've got to have a plan if you draft him with the first-round pick as to how you want to utilize him, especially based on what you have on your roster already."

Wherever he's wanted, he will play, McCaffrey said. At the combine, he will perform as a running back. He needs an impressive 40-yard dash time to quash doubts about his speed. At his pro-day workout at Stanford, he will run routes to show NFL teams the receiving skills he has honed with the help of former Broncos wide receiver Brandon Stokley in Colorado.

And as a returner, well, check the tape. At Stanford, he ran back 56 kickoffs for 1,479 yards and a touchdown, plus 34 punts for 380 yards and a touchdown. In the NFL — especially in Denver — skill players with the desire and know-how to contribute on special teams are coveted.

"I think it's important just to show everything I can do," McCaffrey said. "It's something I pride myself on, being extremely versatile. To show coaches I can play running back, I can play receiver, I can do all the return game stuff. That's important to me."

McCaffrey, wearing a Terrell Davis jersey at the AFC championship game in January 2016.

The thought has crossed McCaffrey's mind, just as it has crossed the minds of Broncos fans. What if he became a Bronco and followed the path of his father? Denver needs a reboot in the running game, it needs a clear No. 3 receiver and help in the slot, and it needs a star in the return game.

McCaffrey could check multiple boxes while helping to jump-start two phases that the Broncos struggled with last season. Vance Joseph, Denver's new head coach, labels McCaffrey "a pro's pro," while Elway has called him "a dynamic player who can do it all."

So what if?

"That'd be awesome. That'd be great," McCaffrey said of becoming a Bronco. "I'd love to play there. It's kind of hard to be a fan of anywhere anymore because you start to wind down things and you don't know where you're going to end up, so I'll be happy to play for anybody."

Maybe that's what McCaffrey thinks about when he sits on that weight bench, his head down and his mind lost in his own untouchable space. Maybe he goes back to being the unknown and disrespected running back with plenty to prove.

Or maybe the picture is a little bigger.

"Growing up I wanted to be an NFL football player," he said. "That's what you dream about when you're playing peewee, when you're a freshman in high school to a senior in high school, then you get to college and it starts becoming a little more real. Sometimes you have to sit back and appreciate where you're at and kind of reflect on all the times you've had in the game of football."

THEY SAID IT

What the Broncos and others in the NFL have said about running back Christian McCaffrey, a former Valor Christian star, at the scouting combine in Indianapolis:

"He's a dynamic player who can do it all. Wherever he goes, he's going to have an impact immediately."  
— John Elway, Broncos general manager

"This kid is a really good football player. If you watch the tape, he's a pro's pro."

— Vance Joseph, Broncos coach

"I heard the people question whether he'd be able to go from the high school level to the college level and now the questions will come out, 'Can he go from the college game to the pro game?' And I think you're going to see the same thing. This guy is a great football player and I think he will have an impact in this league."

— Jack Del Rio, Raiders coach

"He's got great punt return skills, he can return kicks for you. He can be a third-down back. He could probably be a slot receiver if you want him to be. He's got incredible ability to make people miss in space. He's tough enough to run between the tackles. I think any team can find a spot for him."

— Dave Caldwell, Jaguars general manager

# The search for “Bronco guys,” talk of Broncos blocking schemes, more from NFL combine

By Cameron Wolfe

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First-year Broncos head coach Vance Joseph has continued a team tradition of seeking “Bronco guys” in the NFL draft. So what does that mean?

“We want guys that love to play. We want guys who are engaged to play. We want guys who want to play football everyday. That’s the biggest thing with young guys – it’s a full-time job. It’s no longer college and it’s football all day so you gotta love it. It’s gotta be the right personality for an engaged player because if you’re not engaged you can’t play in this league.”

Joseph got even more specific when asked about improvements in the defensive line, arguably the biggest need outside of the offensive line.

“We’re looking for guys who can stop the run game and also can pass rush. That was Earl Mitchell’s thing. He could be good in run game, but also could rush on third downs,” Joseph said. “That’s important when you’re in a 3-4 to have your big guys, your interior guys, be able to rush the passer on sub-downs.”

The Broncos courted Mitchell, who was released by the Dolphins in February, but the defensive linemen who played one season under Joseph decided to take more money and sign with the 49ers.

Scheme matters. The Broncos have been steadfast that they’ll run both power and zone blocking schemes this season. They were a zone team last year and new offensive line coach Jeff Davidson is primarily known as a power blocking coach, but they see value in both.

“It makes you tough to defend,” Joseph said.

The problem is the Broncos can’t rebuild their offense if they don’t know their identity. General manager John Elway talked with offensive coordinator Mike McCoy about that exact issue.

“I’ve asked Mike, ‘What do you want do?’” Elway said. “He said, ‘Whatever we do best.’ I said, ‘Well, we have to draft (a lineman) so we’re not sure what we do best just yet. You got Matt (Paradis) who is more of a zone center and Max (Garcia) who is more of a gap guard. You got to find the best of both worlds and put them all together.”

Adam Gase talks Joseph: Former Broncos offensive coordinator and current Dolphins head coach Adam Gase wasn’t surprised when the Broncos named Joseph head coach. Joseph was the defensive coordinator in Miami last season.

“He was a guy that people were going to want to talk to,” Gase said. “I just kept thinking to myself, ‘It would be hard for a team to turn him down.’ When he gets in a room, his presence and the command he has around people, that would be a tough guy to walk away from and be like, ‘Oh, I don’t want to hire him.’ Anybody would have been running to try to grab him up.”

Testing the market. Broncos are on the hunt for defensive players. Last year they declined Sylvester Williams' fifth-year option but they have expressed interest in trying to retain the nose tackle.

"We've had conversations with his agent," Elway said. "It sounds like that they want to hit the market and find what is out there. He'll hit it and we'll see what happens."

# Broncos have “insider trading” scouting report on potential No. 20 pick, Ryan Ramczyk

By Cameron Wolfe

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Ryan Ramczyk had no idea of the family connection that could lead him ending up a Denver Bronco. Stories about the burly 6-foot-5 1/2, 310-pound left tackle's time in Wisconsin were told. His strengths and weaknesses were broken down before he even met with Broncos officials here at the NFL combine. But it may end helping Ramczyk.

If Denver nabs Ramczyk in the first round of April's draft, the selection will have Chryst written all over. Ramczyk spent two seasons at Wisconsin, sitting out 2015 as a transfer before starting at left tackle in 2016 under head coach Paul Chryst.

It just so happens the Broncos hired Paul's brother, Geep, to be their tight end coach last month. And oh, they've definitely talked about Ramczyk.

“He's given me the lowdown. All kind of insider trading information,” Geep Chryst joked to The Denver Post here Thursday afternoon.

Beyond the family connection, it's a simple path to draw. The Broncos are in the market for a left tackle, and upgrades across the offensive line in general. Broncos head coach Vance Joseph and general manager John Elway have made it their top priority this off-season.

And Ramczyk is considered one of the top two offensive tackles in a weak 2017 draft class. Joseph showered Ramczyk with praise here, a rarity in a tight-mouthed league afraid of giving hints to the opposition.

“He plays like a NFL guy. He's got long arms. He's got great feet. He's tough and smart,” Joseph said Wednesday. “He's definitely a guy most teams are looking at. It's going to be tough to acquire a guy like that at 20, probably.”

Ramczyk may not be available for the Broncos at No. 20, depending on how much he impresses scouts in the next few months. It's hard to find a draft analyst that doesn't list Ramczyk or Utah offensive tackle Garrett Bolles as the top offensive tackle in the draft.

But there are still big question marks surrounding Ramczyk despite his stellar play last fall. He has a hip injury that will likely keep him from participating in full drills prior to the draft. And, he played just one year of Division I football.

Paul Chryst, then the head coach at Pittsburgh, offered Ramczyk a scholarship out of high school, but Ramczyk didn't want to go all the way to Pennsylvania from Wisconsin. He briefly attended Division II Winona State, but left the school before playing a down. He attended two technical schools for a year, sitting out football before transferring to Division III Wisconsin-Stevens Point in his hometown.

It's a decision that Ramczyk has been questioned about from teams all week, including the Broncos. The "do you love football questions" ramped up.

"As an 18-year old, I didn't really know what I wanted to do at the time... I wouldn't say I was burned out, I just felt like I wanted to do something else," Ramczyk said. "Being out of the game a little bit made me realize what I had given up."

That's where the Chryst family conversations may benefit Ramczyk. Paul Chryst is sure to vouch for Ramczyk's character. It was Ramczyk who called Paul Chryst after the coach took the head coaching job at Wisconsin. The young offensive tackle had one request: can I have a do-over and play for you now? Of course, Chryst said.

The athleticism was there from day one for Ramczyk, but it was the work, he said, that made him a first-team All-American last fall.

"It was an amazing journey for sure. I enjoyed every step of it," Ramczyk said. "I wouldn't change a thing. I enjoyed my time at both schools and played some good football."

Ramczyk was a two-time all-conference selection at Stevens Point before being named an All-American at left tackle in his lone season at Wisconsin. Many believe he's the only draft prospect who can be a day-one starter at left tackle, if his medical records check out. Ramczyk said he's two months removed from hip surgery with an estimated five-month recovery time. Teams will have to rely on his tape rather than workouts for evaluations, but he's confident he'll be ready for training camp and hopeful he could be in full gear by organized team activities.

The injury may slow down his transition, but playing in a pro system like Wisconsin is a plus.

"You kind of laugh because Ryan just walks in the door at Wisconsin doing great," Geep Chryst said. "And it's hard to find left tackles. My brother was like, 'thanks for making the call, Ryan. Thanks for letting me know.'"

Now, it could be the Broncos making the call for Ramczyk if everything rolls the right way.

# Broncos draft prospect tracker: Who are they meeting with?

By Cameron Wolfe  
Denver Post  
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Prospects confirmed they will or have met with the Broncos at the NFL Combine, plus any comments they made to The Denver Post about the meeting or team. All teams are allowed up to 60 formal 15-minute interviews with prospects at the NFL Combine.

## Had formal meeting

Christian McCaffrey, RB, Stanford, MET Wednesday night: "That'd be awesome. That'd be great. I'd love to play there."

Dalvin Cook, RB, Florida State, MET Wednesday night. "Great meeting. We got everything sealed away. We watched a lot of tape. It was a great meeting."

Alvin Kamara, RB, Tennessee, MET.

Kareem Hunt, RB, Toledo, MET.

Brian Hill, RB, Wyoming, MET.

D'onta Foreman, RB, Texas, MET.

Samaje Perine, RB, Oklahoma, MET.

Ryan Ramczyk, OT, Wisconsin, MET. "We had a good meeting. They asked a lot of questions. Obviously, I hope they liked what I had to say and how I play as a player."

Dan Feeney, OG, Indiana, MET.

## Plan to meet

Cam Robinson, OT/OG, Alabama, PLAN TO MEET Thursday night.

Garett Bolles, OT, Utah, PLAN TO MEET Thursday night: "I love Colorado. I have a heart there because those are the people I taught on my (LDS) mission so if I end up going there I'd do just fine."

Issac Isiata, OG, Utah, PLAN TO MEET Thursday night: "I'm excited about that one."

Zach Banner, OT, USC, PLAN TO MEET Thursday night.

# Christian McCaffrey meets with Broncos, explains decision to skip bowl game

By Mike Klis

9News

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Christian McCaffrey can run, catch, return, smile, joke, play musical instruments, talk and politely answer questions honestly and intelligently with ease.

What he can't, or won't, do is get over the fact he is generally rated as the third-best -- and only the third-best -- running back in this draft.

McCaffrey flatly said he feels disrespected about where he stands in this running back class, which, by the way, is behind Leonard Fournette and Dalvin Cook, but ahead of everyone else.

"Yeah, definitely," McCaffrey said here Thursday afternoon during his 15-minute interview session with the media covering the NFL Scouting Combine. "I play with a chip on my shoulder always. I feel like a lot of people don't give me credit for my skills and talents. That's just the way it is.

"I also don't really care too much. I don't feel like I'm crazy disrespected. I have a chip on my shoulder at all times. That's my whole life. I'm constantly trying to prove myself."

McCaffrey is a versatile player in the Darren Sproles mold, only Sproles is not an every down back. McCaffrey always has been, whether at Valor Christian High School in Highlands Ranch, where he also played defensive back for secondary coach Brian Dawkins, or at Stanford.

After training for the combine with Loren Landow in the Centennial, McCaffrey's big event here may be the 40-yard dash. Running back is a speed position and because McCaffrey has such a smooth running style, NFL scouts may want to see him beat a 4.5-second time with their own eyes.

Can his 40 time be the difference between getting drafted in the first round or second?

"I don't know. I'm not a decision maker so I have no idea," he said. "My tape's out there and that's the majority of the work I've put in."

The full tape shows 3,622 rushing yards, 955 receiving yards, 1,614 return yards and 31 touchdowns his final two years at Stanford.

There is no tape of McCaffrey during Stanford's 25-23 Sun Bowl win against North Carolina. McCaffrey decided to skip the bowl game and get going with his pro career, a decision that made sense to many but raised eyebrows to others.

Fournette also skipped LSU's bowl game and Michigan's Jabrill Peppers came up injured in pregame warmups of his bowl game.

“As a Stanford man I wasn’t a huge fan of that, we could have used him,” said San Francisco 49ers general manager John Lynch. “But they did all right without him, too. I think you understand their perspective but don’t necessarily think it’s a positive thing for college football. This is such a team sport. When you step back from that I know there are people here that I’ve talk to that that really bothers. It’s unfortunate, with one of those young players I happen to know the young man (McCaffrey) and I would never question his commitment to team and all that but other people will be.

“It’s something that these kids will have to weigh moving forward but I think it will effect football moving forward in years to come.”

McCaffrey said teams have asked him during the combine interview process about skipping his bowl game. The Broncos included. He had his 15-minute visit Wednesday night with Bronco general manager John Elway, head coach Vance Joseph, offensive coordinator Mike McCoy and running backs coach Eric Stutesville.

“I just tell them how it is when they ask,” McCaffrey said. “I’m extremely honest with them and then we move on to now, playing football. ...

“It was a career decision, it was a man decision to try to protect my dream of playing and succeeding in the NFL.”

McCaffrey was more prepared for this combine than probably any other prospect. His dad, Ed McCaffrey, was a star Broncos receiver in the 1995-2003. Elway, Lynch and Raiders head coach Jack Del Rio would come over for dinner.

Ed had said the top two highlights of his career was one, when the Broncos beat Green Bay for their first Super Bowl title, and two, winning a Super Bowl again the next year, a moment accentuated when his two oldest sons, Max and Christian, were able to run on the Miami field and jump around in the confetti.

"I don't remember it, but there's a big picture in my house, I think it was in Sports Illustrated, I had a little blond afro and I was running on the field in my dad's jersey, it looked like a dress, when all of that was falling down," said Christian McCaffrey, who was 2 1/2 at the time.

# Michael Schofield and Kendall Coyne are workout partners for life

By Aaron Matas

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Support is fundamental during offseason training, not to mention there's nothing like competing against another top-notch athlete to stay in the best physical shape. For Broncos 304-pound offensive lineman, Michael Schofield, his support rests with his 5-foot-2, 130-pound fiance, Kendall Coyne.

"We do a good job motivating each other and pushing each other," said Schofield. "She's pretty strong so there's a couple of times I'll grab a weight and I see her picking up a heavier one and I'm like....okay, I'm picking up an even heavier one."

Coyne is part of the United States Women's National Hockey Team. She's a silver medalist from the Sochi Olympics and has her sights on gold in Pyeongchang, South Korea for the 2018 Winter Olympics.

"It's so cool she gets to represent her country," Schofield explained. "Football you don't have that opportunity."

The two grew up in the same Chicago suburb.

"Our high school is 4,000 students and I'm a grade older and she's a grade younger," said Schofield. "I'm up here, she's down [there]; we never saw each other."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Coyne jokingly.

They don't see eye-to-eye in a literal sense, Schofield standing almost a foot and a half taller than his counterpart; but their paths finally crossed when Schofield was preparing for the 2014 NFL Draft.

"It's kind of a coincidence we're in a weight room right now because we met working out back at home," said Coyne.

The two hit it off and their relationship was lifted to a new level when Schofield contacted Coyne over twitter.

While she was finishing up her senior year at Northeastern, Schofield spent his off-season's in Boston as her biggest fan.

"I love watching her play because she's so much faster than everyone," Schofield exclaimed. "She's like a player you make in a video game with 99 speed and she's zooming around everyone and making all these incredible goals."

In her time at Northeastern, Coyne tallied 249 points in 133 games during the four years she spent with the Huskies. During the Sochi Olympics she netted two goals and gave four assists in five games to win a silver medal.

Schofield is obviously very good at his sport, but she might just be better at hers.

Now that the two of them are in the same city, they can work together and help one another. This includes having her fiance, the big-man on the football field, lace up the skates.

"I can shoot kind of hard," Schofield said.

"You have a good shot," Coyne affirmed. "He really puts his weight in it."

Schofield's size comes in handy on the ice for passing, shooting, playing defense and even battling for pucks in the corner. She will never see size like his in her sport. On the field, Coyne's speed comes in handy for him while training.

"There's things where I can use her like she used me in hockey to visualize things," said Schofield.

The NFL offensive lineman finds himself blocking some of the strongest and fastest guys on the field. "I always ask him, am I Von Miller yet?" said Coyne. "She's quick so it definitely helps," said Schofield, but they both agree she's not their yet.

Outside of helping one another train on the ice or on the field, the two like to get away. Coyne even made Schofield hike the Manitou Springs incline, a mile hike up stairs in the Colorado Springs area.

"I thought he was going to break up with me," she said.

The two compete, challenge, yet support each other and that's what makes them so cohesive.

"Just about a month ago he proposed at my favorite ice cream shop back home," said Coyne.

On the ice or the turf, in a weight room or at an ice cream shop, the two prove that life -- like a workout -- is easier with the perfect partner.

# John Elway clears the air about Broncos' quarterback situation

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
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In recent weeks John Elway has spent a lot of time talking about quarterbacks: The ones the Denver Broncos have and the ones some folks think they should get.

But with free agency under a week away, his most important comments came to light at the NFL scouting combine. The first of those addressed Paxton Lynch, and the second Trevor Siemian.

They are the quarterbacks the Broncos have, 23 and 25 years old, respectively, set to enter their second and third NFL seasons. Elway, as the Broncos' chief football decision-maker, and head coach Vance Joseph have each pledged to support both.

Elway and Joseph have said if the Broncos let Siemian and Lynch compete in training camp for the starting job, they will emerge with a quarterback who can help get them back into playoffs. But each quarterback has carried a question in tow, at least in the national narrative.

For Lynch it's this: Since the Broncos traded up in the first round of the 2016 draft to get him, is Elway in a hurry to play him to justify the move?

Former coach Gary Kubiak said during Super Bowl week in Houston last month the Broncos selected Lynch knowing full well "it would take some time" for the quarterback to grow from the spread offense he played in college to the pro game.

"He's just being asked to do things as a pro he wasn't asked to do in college," Kubiak said. "You can't skip the learning curve."

Elway addressed that at the combine when he was asked about the timetable.

"If Paxton's not ready to go, I don't want him to go," Elway said. "We drafted Paxton to come in and compete for a job, Trevor did a good job last year, but we're looking for a guy we can hang our hat on for a long, long time. The last thing you want to do is, whether it be Paxton or anybody else, is put them in there before they're ready."

Because Lynch was a first-round pick, the Broncos can have him under contract for five seasons on his first deal, through the 2020 season. Elway's comments were consistent with what Kubiak said earlier this year, offering that "you've got to raise 'em right when it comes to quarterbacks."

Elway expressed the Broncos' belief that Siemian is a player. Siemian's teammates have consistently lauded his toughness and ability to work well in the tightest moments. As one player put it recently: "If we protect his [expletive] we're in the playoffs. He can win, he doesn't get rattled and he's tough as hell."

Siemian had surgery on his left, non-throwing shoulder after the season. It also didn't help that, in an effort to try to make something happen last season, Siemian didn't always show enough discretion in how long he hung on to the ball.

Siemian played with the bad shoulder in Week 4 -- he missed one game because of it and another with a left foot injury.

"I'm not worried about Trevor's shoulder," Elway said Wednesday. "He did a hell of a job playing through that last year; I'm not worried about his shoulder."

Elway was later asked about the most important attribute a young quarterback can have, and he replied "toughness and mental toughness."

So that's where the Broncos are at regarding their quarterback situation. Will they "kick the tires," as Elway said this week, on a veteran quarterback in free agency? They will, because in the world of free agency you never say never with the Broncos. But they won't feel compelled to make a deal that isn't on their terms.

It's important to note in those decisions the development of their two young quarterbacks is one of the biggest considerations. They're not in a hurry with Lynch, and they feel they can win with what they have if Lynch and Siemian remain the only two quarterbacks in the conversation.

"We've got guys who combined to win nine games last year as starters," Joseph said. "We should probably have won two more games. We're fine there, with those two kids."

"Is [Lynch] ready? I'm not sure. Obviously he's got great skills, he's a tall man with a big arm. He had two starts last year ... it's going to be an open competition, but whoever wins the job, that's who's going to play. That's as fair as it's going to be."

# Christian McCaffrey: It would be 'awesome' to be picked by Broncos

By Jeff Legwold

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Often a prospect at the NFL's scouting combine will step into the room the Denver Broncos use for player interviews and feel a bit in awe seeing John Elway for the first time.

For Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey, it was a far different experience. McCaffrey's father Ed played for the Broncos' back-to-back Super Bowl winners to close out the 1997 and 1998 seasons, so seeing Elway was a reminder of home.

It was the same when McCaffrey saw Oakland Raiders coach Jack Del Rio inside Lucas Oil Stadium. Del Rio's son, Luke, was a quarterback for McCaffrey's high school team when Jack Del Rio was the Broncos defensive coordinator.

"Looking at the Raiders' side and the Broncos' side, so many people here that I've grown up knowing," McCaffrey said Thursday at the combine. "It's pretty surreal now that I'm here."

McCaffrey met with the Broncos' decision-makers Wednesday night. Not as a hometown kid catching up, but as a versatile runner, receiver and returner the Broncos could use to spice up an offense that will get plenty of attention in free agency and the draft.

Or as McCaffrey put it: "I believe I would be an every-down back and a specialist."

"He's a dynamic player who can do it all," Elway said. "Wherever he goes he's going to have an immediate impact."

Asked if it would be any more difficult for McCaffrey to play for the team his dad played for, in the city where his parents still live -- Ed is a cohost on an afternoon radio show in Denver -- Elway said Christian's competitiveness would make it an easy transition.

"Knowing what I know of Christian and knowing how competitive he is, he's got a great deal of respect for his dad, but he also looks at himself and he's going to blaze his own trail," Elway said. "The expectations that he has for himself are awful high."

The Broncos have the 20th pick in the first round and, depending on the team or the draft analyst polled, McCaffrey sits as the No. 3 or No. 4 back on the draft board leading up to the combine workouts for backs Friday.

It is a deep draft class at the position as well, which could make teams more patient in selecting one and potentially push a back or two further down the board than one might expect. But LSU's Leonard Fournette, Florida State's Dalvin Cook, McCaffrey and Tennessee's Alvin Kamara generally are regarded as the top of the class.

On the prospect of the Broncos selecting him, McCaffrey said he would embrace the idea.

“That’d be awesome, that’d be great, I’d love to play there,” McCaffrey said. “It’s kind of hard to be a fan of anywhere any more because you start to wind down things and you don’t know where you’re going to end up. I’d be happy to play for anybody.”

The Broncos, who struggled in the offensive line for much of the season and saw three backs finish the year on injured reserve, finished the season 27th in rushing, 27th in total offense and 22nd in scoring in a 9-7 finish.

McCaffrey is one of the most versatile players on the draft board, having gained 3,864 yards in the 2015 season, breaking Barry Sanders’ single-season record for all-purpose yardage. McCaffrey suffered what he called a bruised hip during the 2016 season and still led the nation with 2,327 all-purpose yards, including 1,603 rushing yards.

In Indianapolis, McCaffrey measured in at 5-foot-11 and weighed 202 pounds. Given his production at Stanford, he expressed a little confusion at why some have questioned his ability to transition to a full-time player in the NFL.

“I wish I knew, to be honest,” McCaffrey said. “I play with a chip on my shoulder always, I feel like people don’t always give me credit for my skills and talents and that’s just the way it is. I also don’t care too much, I don’t feel like I’m crazy disrespected. I have a chip on my shoulder at all times.”

# John Lynch's first look at combine as evaluator came with Broncos

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
March 3, 2017

This might be former Denver Broncos safety John Lynch's first trip to the scouting combine as an NFL general manager, but it isn't Lynch's first trip overall to the event since he closed out his playing career.

The newly minted San Francisco 49ers general manager was among the Denver Broncos' personnel and scouting staff one previous time in Indianapolis at the invitation of Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway.

While Lynch, a network television analyst at the time, was denied access to some of the combine activities, he said he did get a feel of the process for personnel evaluators. And that is exactly what he is in his new job.

"One time I did come here ... I got to see the players work out and there's a lot of value – a lot of people say, 'You can see it all on film,' but I always think in person is better," Lynch said Thursday at the combine. "That did give me a snapshot and make me a little more familiar with the surroundings once I got here."

Lynch has also sat in on some of the Broncos' pre-draft meetings in recent years and had broken down game video on safeties at times during those years. Lynch also said Thursday that Elway, a longtime friend, was also one of the key voice's in Lynch's whirlwind courtship with the 49ers.

From first interview to his hire, it was less than a week before he was the 49ers' general manager. Asked Thursday if he consulted with Elway to make a decision about taking his current job, Lynch said:

"Many times, just through our friendship, he's one of my better friends in the world, from that perspective long before I thought about doing this. ... But I believe it was on a Tuesday I had my first discussions [with the 49ers], by Sunday I was hired, but he was one of the people I leaned on during that week. It wasn't a lot of conversations, it was probably two, but he was, as always great counsel to me, very familiar with the situation and provided a lot of wisdom."

Even as a player, including his four seasons with the Broncos, Lynch had always showed plenty of interest in the draft. Each year he was well-versed in a long list of prospects and often could express what kinds of players he would seek if he were constructing a team.

"I would always spend six, seven hours watching the draft," Lynch said.

Lynch finished out his playing career on a Broncos' team coached by Mike Shanahan, whose son, Kyle, is now the 49ers coach. Lynch said Thursday he and Kyle Shanahan had already developed a quality working relationship.

And he joked that his opinions on personnel weren't so readily accepted by Mike Shanahan when Lynch was still a safety.

"[Mike] Shanahan didn't listen much when I gave him suggestions," Lynch said with a smile.

The 49ers have the No. 2 pick in the draft and with Colin Kaepernick headed for free agency, the team will have no quarterbacks on the roster under contract for the 2017 season.

# McCaffrey: teammates gave him ovation, love for bowl boycott

By Arnie Stapleton  
Associated Press  
March 3, 2017

For Christian McCaffrey, the only thing harder than skipping the Sun Bowl was having to inform his teammates.

He stood before them to say he wouldn't be suiting up for his final game at Stanford to avoid risking injury on the cusp of his NFL career. Then, he braced for the blowback.

Instead, he got goosebumps.

They gave him a "little ovation" and a "lot of love," McCaffrey recounted Thursday.

"And that was one of the toughest decisions I've ever had to make. I was just real lucky to have a bunch of guys that had my back."

Outside the locker room, McCaffrey has drawn plenty of praise and criticism alike for his decision, which he didn't address publicly until meeting with the media at the NFL scouting combine.

Teams are also peppering him with questions about bypassing the bowl game, he said.

"I just tell them how it is when they ask," McCaffrey said. "I'm extremely honest with them and then we move on to now and playing football."

What he tells them, he said, is "it was a career decision ... to try to protect my dream of playing and succeeding in the NFL."

Running back Leonard Fournette missed LSU's Citrus Bowl matchup with Louisville to rest an injured ankle, a decision he announced three days after McCaffrey, the 2015 Heisman Trophy runner-up, said he'd sit out the Sun Bowl against North Carolina after dealing with a bruised hip in 2016.

"As a Stanford fan, I wasn't a huge fan of that. But they did all right without him, too," new 49ers general manager John Lynch said, adding that while he understands the bowl boycotts, "I know people here that that really bothers."

Lynch has known McCaffrey, whose father, Ed, had a long NFL career as a wide receiver, for many years. "So, I would never question his commitment to team and all that," Lynch said. "But other people will. So, it's something that these kids have to weigh. I think it will affect football going forward for many years to come."

Broncos boss John Elway, who also has known McCaffrey since he was a youngster, didn't initially agree with his decision but has come around, he said.

"You know what, I understand it now. Obviously, when I thought about it, kind of the old school in me wanted to come out saying, 'Why not play? It's your last game,'" Elway said. "But I tell you what, when you look at where the league is now and the value of these contracts for these kids coming out now, and the risk that they're taking, the old salty guy in me got flipped back to saying I understand why they didn't play."

The decisions by McCaffrey and Fournette came a year after Notre Dame linebacker Jaylon Smith cost himself millions by blowing out his left knee in the Fiesta Bowl. Smith was projected as a top-five pick before his injury, and instead went to the Dallas Cowboys in the second round with the 34th overall pick. The difference in guaranteed contract money is about \$19 million.

The Cowboys used their first pick, fourth overall, on Ezekiel Elliott, whose spectacular rookie season restored value to first-round running back prospects like Fournette and McCaffrey.

Elliott, however, was among those who didn't like Fournette and McCaffrey bailing on their teammates, tweeting, "I would do anything to play one more time with my brothers in that scarlet and gray."

When others pointed out he skipped his senior season to enter the draft, Elliott tweeted: "there is a difference between not coming back for your last year and not finishing your last season."

Tell that to Jake Butt. Michigan's star tight end is this year's cautionary tale after tearing an ACL in the Wolverines' 33-32 loss to Florida State in the Orange Bowl.

Even fellow running back prospects have differing points of view.

Tennessee's Alvin Kamara said, "I was going to play the bowl game regardless of anything. I think (it helped me). Just being there my last game with my teammates and my coaches and my fan base, I think that was the most important thing."

The other question McCaffrey faces is whether he can have similar success in the NFL as an all-purpose back. At Stanford, he reached the end zone 33 times on rushes, receptions and returns.

"I don't think there's anybody else that can do all the things I can as far as run between the tackles, outside pass protect, play X, Z, slot, and do a lot of bunch of stuff in the return game, also. I think that's what sets me apart," said McCaffrey, who plans to run routes at his pro day later this month.

Raiders coach Jack Del Rio, whose son, Luke, played high school ball with McCaffrey, is a believer.

"I heard the people question whether he'd be able to go from the high school level to the college level and now the questions will come out, 'Can he go from the college game to the pro game?'" Del Rio said. "And I think you're going to see the same thing."

# Top prospect Christian McCaffrey: 'I don't think there's anybody who can do all the things I can'

By Troy Renck

KMGH

March 3, 2017

The NFL Combine, shed to its essence, amounts to a job interview in a cool sweatsuit.

The 330 players arrive with dreams. Many leave with nerves and concerns. Christian McCaffrey stepped to the microphone Thursday and sold himself to 32 potential employers.

"I don't think there's anybody else that can do all the things I can," said McCaffrey, who measured 5-foot-11 and 202 pounds, "as far as how I run between the tackles, outside, pass protect, play slot (receiver) and do a lot of stuff in the return game. I think that's what sets me apart."

Two things distinguish McCaffrey. His versatility and his conviction. After rushing for more than 3,600 yards over his final two college seasons, McCaffrey sat out Stanford's bowl game. He received support of his coach David Shaw and teammates. However, he had to explain his decision to NFL executives, wondering why he would bypass his last college game. Broncos general manager John Elway warmed to the decision after analyzing the risks and rewards of the modern player. San Francisco GM John Lynch would have preferred McCaffrey play.

McCaffrey addressed the question Thursday, then elected to move on.

"I just tell them how it is when they ask and I am extremely honest with them," McCaffrey said.

Considered the third best back available behind LSU's Leonard Fournette and Florida State's Dalvin Cook, McCaffrey remains hard to typecast. He worked as a bellcow at Stanford, but it hardly illuminated his value. He proved a wrecking ball as a receiver and return man. It is that varied skill set that creates an argument for the Broncos selecting him with the 20th overall pick. Denver interviewed McCaffrey on Wednesday. Having grown up around the team watching his father Ed, it was a cool experience.

"It was awesome," McCaffrey said. "These are guys that my dad played with, guys that I have been around my entire life."

McCaffrey also knows Oakland coach Jack Del Rio well. He played with Del Rio's son at Luke, winning state championships at Valor Christian High School. It was there McCaffrey established himself as one of the greatest prep stars in Colorado history.

"First of all Christian is an amazing young man," Del Rio said. "I heard the people question whether he'd be able to go from the high school level to the college level and now the questions come out, 'Can he go from the college game to the pros?' I think you're going to see the same thing. This is a great football player, and I think he will have an impact in this league."

McCaffrey missed time last season because of a hip issue. His toughness has never been questioned. But speed matters. And if McCaffrey can flash on the 40 with a time under 4.5 it will only mute more doubters.

"I play with a chip on my shoulder always," McCaffrey said. "I feel like a lot of people don't give me credit for my skills and talents. That's just the way it is. I don't care too much. I am constantly trying to prove myself."

# Broncos' free agent pursuits include quarterback, line help

By Troy Renck  
KMGH  
March 3, 2017

Given the opportunity to slam the door on Tony Romo chatter, the Broncos swung it wide open Wednesday.

Broncos general manager John Elway declared, "We will look at everything." Coach Vance Joseph praised young quarterbacks Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, but qualified his remarks to Denver7 by adding "any player that comes available in free agency we are going to look at."

What Joseph lacks in experience, he brings in wisdom. The easiest path to success for a first-year coach is a proven signal-caller. Romo brings a breathtaking resume -- 78 regular-season wins, 248 touchdown passes -- and alarming apprehension. He made four starts over the past two seasons, and those who chronicled him Dallas repeat the same mantra -- that Romo can play at a high level, but few are convinced he can stay healthy. If the two broken collarbone injuries represented a fluke, the fractured L1 vertebra in his upper back carries concern.

Can Romo, who will be 37 in April, remain upright and effective? To enhance Romo's chances, the Broncos must improve the offensive line. Denver allowed 40 sacks last season, leaving Trevor Siemian with an injured left shoulder and left foot.

Look for the Broncos to be aggressive in free agency, particularly at guard. There are plenty of options, including Cincinnati's Kevin Zeitler, Dallas' Ronald Leary, Green Bay's T.J. Lang and Detroit's Larry Warford.

Zeitler projects to receive in excess of \$10 million a year as the top-ranked guard available. The Broncos like multiple options in this group and are expected to make a strong early push beginning during the tampering allowed period on March 7. The strategy for tackles could differ. Andrew Whitworth represents the best, but he is 35 years old. Denver, according to sources, is reluctant to set the left tackle market, and could decide to remain patient to see what develops.

It makes sense in this regard. There's no reason to make a left tackle a big ticket item if the money is better used to bulk up the defense. Elway believes the defense remains championship caliber, and wants to bolster the group. There are multiple avenues to pursue along the line, among them a defensive end like Calais Campbell or tackles Brandon Williams, Dominique Easley and Dontari Poe.

# Broncos checked previous sexual assault and harassment complaints before hiring Vance Joseph

By Lindsay Jones

USA Today

March 3, 2017

Part of the Denver Broncos' vetting process before hiring Vance Joseph as their new head coach in January included an investigation into sexual assault and sexual harassment complaints against him more than a decade ago.

While serving as an assistant coach at the University of Colorado, Joseph was disciplined by the school for having inappropriate sexual relationships with two female athletic trainers in 2003, which qualified as sexual harassment under CU policy. He served a suspension from his coaching duties in 2004 and then left for a job at Bowling Green.

"We had our people looking into it," Broncos general manager John Elway told USA TODAY Sports at the NFL scouting combine. "We decided, based on what we knew and everything that came out, that it was not something that was going to influence our decision on who Vance was."

A Colorado state attorney general's task force investigation into the harassment accusation in 2004 also revealed a sexual assault allegation levied against Joseph while he was coaching at CU. According to a police report first obtained by the (Boulder, Colo.) Daily Camera, two women told investigators that Joseph crawled into their beds naked while they were sleeping and touched them. Joseph was never interviewed by law enforcement or charged with a crime.

Elway said that Joseph was asked directly about the accusations during the interview process, and the Broncos were satisfied with his explanation. The coach explicitly denied the assault allegations, but told the team he was deeply embarrassed by the sexual harassment incident because he was a married father.

The various allegations against Joseph came as part of a Colorado state grand jury investigation into the University of Colorado's football program in 2005.

Other components of the Broncos' due diligence into Joseph included soliciting references from his previous NFL employers. He came recommended by the Fritz Pollard Alliance, which helps promote minority coaching candidates.

# Players' union tells NFL competition committee to ban leaping on field goals

By Mark Maske  
Washington Post  
March 3, 2017

Representatives of the NFL Players Association told the league's competition committee here Wednesday that there should be a ban on defensive players leaping over the line of scrimmage to attempt to block field goal attempts or extra points.

"The jumping over on the field goal, I think, is just leading to a really dangerous play for everybody," said Eric Winston, the veteran offensive lineman who serves as the NFLPA's president. "If you jump over the center, the jumper is in a really bad spot. He can land on his head. I think the guys that are getting jumped over are going to end up getting hurt, with those guys landing on them. So I'll be very interested to see what they'll do there. I think something probably needs to be done."

The players expressed that view to the competition committee during a meeting Wednesday at the NFL scouting combine, Winston said.

"That was something we expressed. . . . [It's] just becoming a really, really dangerous play and now especially because everyone's on the lookout for it, right?" Winston said. "So someone's ankles are going to get clipped. They're going to go ass over teakettle, and either someone's going to get landed on or he's going to fall on his head. And they're really bad injuries, too. It's not like, oh, he could sprain his ankle. Those are neck injuries. Those are bad knee injuries. We expressed that to them, and I hope they follow through on that."

The competition committee seemed receptive to the message delivered by the NFLPA representatives about that play, Winston said.

"I think they're probably on board with that," he said.

Under current rules, it is a penalty for a defensive player to leap over the line of scrimmage on a field goal try or extra point only if he lands on an offensive player. A successful leap over the line of scrimmage is legal.

A defensive player cannot, under NFL rules, line up across from the snapper at the line of scrimmage, however.

Winston said it perhaps should remain legal for a player to leap over the line of scrimmage on a kick from outside the tight end position. But such leaps should not be legal in the interior of the line, he said.

The leaps-on-kicks play was among a variety of safety-related topics addressed during Wednesday's meeting, according to Winston. Representatives of the NFLPA meet annually with the competition committee at the combine.

“I think the game’s in a good place,” Winston said. “We’re trying to make it as safe as possible. We’re looking at different ways to do it, obviously still trying to get launching and other stuff out.”

# A Battle Between Agents Brews

By Robert Klemko

MMQB

March 3, 2017

We're in the meat of the NFL combine, with player workouts and interviews underway as the draft picture begins to take shape. I'll get to a few of the newsy nuggets delivered on the final day of media availability for head coaches and executives, but first, a behind-the-scenes fight that could shape the NFL agent business for years to come.

This fall and winter, several agents felt the industry was reaching a tipping point in regard to player fees. The one-time industry standard of 3% slipped to 1.5% in August when the NFLPA changed the default language on the Standard Representation Agreement (SRA).

Meanwhile, a minority of the largest agencies, including CAA, have recently made a practice of offering a sliding percentage scale to its newest clients, with a 1% fee should a player be chosen in the first round, according to agency sources. Smaller agents have since struggled to compete with the giants of the industry, leading veteran agents Vann McElroy, Pat Dye Jr. and Peter Schaffer to seek the creation of an association of like-minded agents to fight the new normal.

"When it gets to the point where you're just getting completely reamed," McElroy told The MMQB, "you've got to at least have a conversation about it."

McElroy and others fear that larger agencies will acquire talent in bulk, wholesaling their services and maximizing their profits with clients who live up to expectations and discarding those who don't.

"The agency will move on from these guys who aren't going to get that big second contract," says McElroy, who played safety for the Raiders and Seahawks from 1982-92. "You're not getting the kind of representation you deserve. I'd hate to see it taken back to the 80s when I was playing, where you could not make money being an agent, and you had guys coming into the business whose main goal was getting to the players' money and not what was in the best interest in the player. I fear it could revert to that."

Adds Schaffer: "We pick a guy and we make a big investment in training and we're taking a risk that he gets to the second deal. We're fine with that, but it gets to a point where it's not even worth it. We need to do a better job of educating players on what we do."

Hesitation among agents being recruited to the new association is vast and multi-faceted. Some fear the association would ultimately hold little influence. Others fear the NFLPA will simply find ways to decertify those who participate, leaving their careers in ruin while other agents poach their clients. Still others have expressed concern about the credentials of the most vocal members of the association effort.

Said one agent, whose company charges players 3% and has encountered roadblocks with rookies who have been offered a lower rate: “My main problem is that the people screaming and calling for change are in many cases the one’s guilty of reducing the fees in the first place. Why should we trust them now?”

Nearly annual attempts at forming an agent’s association with meaningful bargaining power have failed, with many pointing to acrimony and discord among rival agents. The issue was not discussed at Thursday’s NFLPA-hosted agent forum in Indianapolis (“The NFLPA met with every available certified agent today,” says Players Association executive director George Atallah. “I did not hear that these agents raised those issues in the forum... Our goal should be making sure that every free agent that hits the market gets paid. We are always happy to talk about that issue.”)

One player rep who is hesitant to join the surging cause for fear of retribution described the new wave of dwindling agent fees as “an industry standard of stupidity.”

“You’re basically becoming Wal-Mart, but there’s no demand for it in the marketplace,” the agent says. “No other sport is as low as 3% and football has the highest turnover and the highest need for good representation. They’re whoring themselves out to be in the green room at the draft. Ego.”

\* \* \*

Notable...

Combine press conferences are among the most sterile press availabilities on the league calendar, so it was refreshing to witness a few moments of candor from some new and old faces here. Some QB-related takeaways from two head coaches and a GM not afraid to spill some truth in Indy...

- John Lynch, the former player, broadcaster, and now GM of the 49ers, opened a window to an important facet of the combine process with a glowing review of former Notre Dame quarterback DeShone Kizer, one of three QBs looking to separate themselves from the herd. “This whole thing is not just about an interview,” Lynch said, “but if you were grading him on that alone, he blew the doors off. He’s an impressive young man, his film’s very impressive... I think it’s a very talented draft class at that position, one we’re very excited about.”

What’s Lynch looking for in a quarterback? He said a big source of inspiration and knowledge in his post-football career has been the production meetings he conducted with coaches and players while serving as a color commentator on Fox.

“I always want to be careful with this because it’s not like I was doing those meetings with the idea that I would one day be a GM,” Lynch told The MMQB. “But some of the things I learned from the Patriots—Tom, and how Bill has challenged him over the years. Thought processes, when to take risks and when not to. Tom said, ‘Boy I’m a real dummy if I throw a pick on first down, because I have so many options.’ They talked about, ‘In order to win, you have to first keep from losing.’ Things like that stick with you. It was such a fascinating and fun job.”

- Raiders coach Jack Del Rio spoke at length on Thursday about how he would have liked the team to bounce back from the loss of quarterback Derek Carr, who suffered a season-ending leg injury on the eve of the playoffs, effectively ending Oakland's resurgent 2016 campaign.

"Regardless, if you lose your quarterback, to me there is still a way to get it done," he said. "It just became a lot harder, but there is still a way. There was no concession and there never will be. Our approach is always: next man up and let's go compete.

"Honestly, [when] we finished the year, I was disappointed because in my opinion what we need to be about is 'Hey let's rally, let's find a way and go get it done no matter what,' and we weren't able to do that."

Del Rio said that sentiment will be an emphasis when the team reconvenes, but he admitted that the importance of the quarterback position, and the limits imposed by the new collective bargaining agreement on practice time and team contact in the offseason, makes preparing a viable backup one of the tallest tasks in the league today.

"That position more than any, because of the demands of the position, the details required, suffers the most. There are plusses and minuses of any CBA system and with this one that's one of the minuses—you're not developing your quarterbacks."

Del Rio is not optimistic that a developmental league to replace NFL Europe, which folded in 2007, would ameliorate the effects of the bargaining agreement ratified in 2011.

"The problem is you're not in the same system," he said. "You need the player to have reps in your system with timing with your guys. That's where the polish happens. The number of Dak Prescotts that come along? That's like finding a needle in a haystack."

- What happened to Cam Newton? It's one of the biggest questions Ron Rivera has faced this offseason following a lackluster 2016 for the then-reigning MVP. Rivera has chosen to retain his offensive staff, led by coordinator Mike Shula, and simply tweak the approach, preferring to maintain continuity rather than start over with a new group.

The coach discussed the goal of Newton running the football less next year after the quarterback struggled through a shoulder injury and a concussion suffered in October. And Rivera fully expects Newton to revolt against the idea.

"I promise you that's going to happen," Rivera said. "He wants the football, but we have to be very dogged in terms of what we're going to do with him and how we're going to do it. We have to pick and choose. It's got to be the right situation and circumstances.

"But you know him, he wants to succeed, he wants to do things that help this football team win and I believe he's going to do the things he needs to do."

# 2017 NFL combine: Cook, Bortles, Redskins and more winners and losers from Day 2

By Will Brinson  
CBSSports.com  
March 3, 2017

Another day is in the books at the 2017 NFL combine and we're still lacking in real action here in Indy. The running backs and offensive linemen did the bench press, but we haven't seen anything in terms of on-field drills yet thanks to the backed-up schedule.

And yet there's plenty to focus on from Thursday's goings-on, particularly with more coaches and GMs speaking about the state of their teams.

Let's dive right in and look at some winners and losers from Thursday's combine action.

## Winners

**Dalvin Cook:** The Florida State running back has concerns about his shoulder that could potentially scare teams. So when he sat down for the bench press, there was some concern about what number he might put up. Cook, who described himself as the "best running back in the draft" during his media session, quelled any concerns quickly by throwing up 22 reps on the bench.

**Alex Smith:** Chiefs GM John Dorsey joined us on the CBS Sports set on Thursday and stated unequivocally that in 2017 his quarterback will be the veteran who's been on the roster for years. Without discussing any specifics about other quarterbacks, Dorsey said it's "case closed" for Smith as the starter in Kansas City. There was plenty of belief that he could pursue soon-to-be free agent Tony Romo, but consider that off the table.

**Mitch Trubisky:** The North Carolina quarterback was an inch taller than many expected. Sound the alarms! But seriously, Trubisky checked in at 6-foot-2, and that means he's just as tall as the rest of the top quarterbacks in this class outside of Deshaun Kizer. Trubisky saw some speculation on Thursday that he might be actually taken No. 1 overall, but it still remains a pretty big longshot that the Browns would bypass Myles Garrett and take a gamble on a quarterback with 13 starts.

**Jack Del Rio:** Del Rio didn't actually have to do anything to win other than have yours truly deal to him in blackjack. This is a thing that actually happened, and it was amazing. Not only did the Raiders head coach hit on 17, but he managed to pull a blackjack on the second hand.

No, the deck was not rigged. Swear on my family's life.

## Losers

**Blake Bortles:** There was a little bit of concerning news when it came to Bortles on Thursday because the Jaguars, despite GM Dave Caldwell endorsing him as their quarterback for the long haul, wouldn't commit to picking up Bortles' fifth-year option.

“Just like with everything we’ve done from the end of the season until now, we’ll get a lot of input from our coaches, we’ve got OTAs, we’ve got mini-camps, we’ve got a lot of things between now and then to see where he’s at,” Caldwell said. “I don’t think any decision will be made until closer to May.”

Here’s the thing: If Bortles was the quarterback Caldwell described, this wouldn’t be an issue. \$18 million in 2018 is a lot of money, but losing a quarterback to free agency is a non-starter if he’s a quality player. On the bright side, Bortles could be in a great spot if the Jags don’t use the option, because he would either get franchised or hit the open market if he has a strong 2017.

Drew Brees: The rumors that sprouted up on Thursday about the Saints possibly trading Brandin Cooks to the Titans or Eagles might ultimately just be rumors. And say what you want about Cooks -- complaining about targets, not a true No. 1 -- but he’s an explosive player who can stretch the field and take short passes a long way because of his speed. Losing Cooks, who has back-to-back years going over 1,100 yards, wouldn’t be a plus for Brees or Sean Payton on the offensive side of things, even if the Saints would ultimately be a better team by adding multiple young defensive pieces to the roster. Brees will lose a key piece every now and then and just plug right along (hello, Jimmy Graham), but he won’t be happy about losing Cooks either.

Brock Osweiler: No real surprise out of Houston, but there is drama surrounding the future of Brock Osweiler. The quarterback had a horrid season in 2016 and Bill O’Brien confirmed on Thursday there would be an open competition heading into 2017 to determine the team’s starting quarterback.

“Competition is open with every position on our team -- obviously with the exception of a few. I mean, I’m not going to stand up here and tell you that every single position is open,” O’Brien said. “Obviously, there’s positions that we know certain players are going to start. But the majority of positions on our team -- that’s what we’ve based our program on from the day we walked in here. We’ve based our program on competition and competing in practice. That’s kind of what we -- probably like 31 other teams -- that’s really what we believe in. The depth chart changes with us.

“I think you guys have seen that whether it’s quarterback or any other position. So that’s what our team is based on. That’s what our coaching staff believes in. Competition will always be a part of our program here.”

So, in other words, every position is up for competition except for the positions with highly-paid players who are actually starts occupying them. Osweiler stunk, and now he’s going to probably see additional competition.

Redskins: Hard to believe that a year ago the Redskins were coming off a season where they made the playoffs and were division champions again. It’s even harder to believe that just a few months ago, they were in the hunt for a wild-card spot. Because now they’re a team that looks totally rudderless. Kirk Cousins is on the second-straight franchise tag and a long-term deal doesn’t look like it’s on the horizon for him with Washington. And now there’s another red flag: the Redskins GM isn’t at the combine .

There are rumors floating about what Scot McCloughan is doing right now and his job status, but CBS Sports NFL Insider Jason La Canfora reported McCloughan is still with the team and just grinding on tape.

Regardless of what's happening with the GM, there should be big concerns about the state of affairs in Washington, as dysfunction continues to swirl around the Redskins. With Cousins likely headed elsewhere after 2017 -- and maybe sooner -- there is a chance things start to go south for this franchise quickly. Again.

# Report: Bills would have interest in Denver QB Trevor Siemian

By Jay Skurski  
Buffalo NEws  
March 3, 2017

Speculation season is in full swing in the NFL.

With free agency opening in exactly one week, reports are emerging every day about potential interest teams have in players. One of those reports Thursday connected the Buffalo Bills with Denver Broncos quarterback Trevor Siemian.

Benjamin Allbright, a reporter based in Denver, said that if the Broncos could successfully land quarterback Tony Romo, the Bills would be interested in acquiring Siemian.

@AllbrightNFL

If the #Broncos do end up with Romo, the #Bills would have interest in acquiring Trevor Siemian.

Siemian, 25, started 14 games for Denver in 2016, throwing for 3,401 yards, 18 touchdowns and 10 interceptions. Bills offensive coordinator Rick Dennison held the same job for the Broncos last season, so Siemian would know the offense well, if acquired.

In a follow-up tweet, Allbright suggested acquiring Siemian would not automatically mean the Bills would move on from current starter Tyrod Taylor.

The Bills have until March 11 to decide whether to exercise Taylor's contract option, which would trigger nearly \$31 million in guaranteed money. Siemian would be a much-cheaper option, with cap hits of \$650,000 in 2017 and \$720,000 in 2018.

The Bills now have nine days to decide Taylor's future.

"I think he's definitely a starting quarterback in this league, and he won a few games with the Bills that we could not have won without him," Chargers coach Anthony Lynn, the offensive coordinator for the Bills last year, said of Taylor. "Working with him 1-on-1, I understand his upside maybe better than others. I think the sky's the limit for Tyrod Taylor. He's a very smart, hard-working professional."

# John Elway thinks he has “that guy” in Paxton Lynch

By Michael David Smith

Pro Football Talk

March 3, 2017

Broncos General Manager John Elway says the top job when building a team is finding the franchise quarterback who can be “that guy.” And Elway thinks he drafted “that guy” last year.

Elway said on PFT Live that he still thinks he made a good pick when he took Paxton Lynch in the first round of last year’s draft, although he acknowledged that until Lynch proves it — and the Broncos prove they can develop him — it’s all speculation.

“I think so. I’m excited about Paxton. But you never know,” Elway said. “Last year, picking Paxton in the first round, and the talent level that we see, Paxton is going to have a great career in the NFL. The bottom line is bringing him along the right way and developing him the right way.”

Elway’s comments echo those of head coach Vance Joseph, who said yesterday that he thinks the Broncos are in good shape with Lynch and Trevor Siemian. The Broncos may always change their tune when Tony Romo becomes available, but they are talking like a team that is set at quarterback.

# Report: Bills might be interested in Trevor Siemian

By Darin Gantt  
Pro Football Talk  
March 3, 2017

When the quarterback dominoes start falling next week, it could send some guys into the market we haven't previously thought about being available.

According to the Buffalo News, citing Denver radio personality Benjamin Albright, a Broncos move could change the Bills plans at quarterback.

As the story goes, if Denver is able to land Tony Romo, the Bills would then be interested in acquiring Trevor Siemian to either compete with or replace Tyrod Taylor.

There are obviously a lot of moving parts there, but the connection is new Bills offensive coordinator Rick Dennison, who coached Siemian last year and would like a guy who knew his system.

Of course, there are a couple of big factors here, beginning with Romo's decision. And then there's the small matter that the Broncos might not want to part with Siemian anyway, since he's proven reasonably capable while being inexpensive. Pairing Romo with 2016 first-rounder Paxton Lynch would ostensibly make Siemian surplus to requirements, but Romo's durability concerns might lead them to prefer to keep all three.

And the Bills have to decide by March 11 whether to pick up the option on Taylor's deal, which would trigger \$31 million in guarantees.

So while sending Siemian to Buffalo might make some connect-the-dots sense, a lot of stuff has to happen to make it a possibility.

# Christian McCaffrey says NFL execs have asked often about skipping his bowl game

By Zac Jackson  
Pro Football Talk  
March 3, 2017

Former Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey has known the questions would be coming at this week's NFL Scouting Combine.

And they have.

McCaffrey made the unsurprising announcement last December that he would be giving up his final season of college football to enter the NFL Draft, then he made at least a somewhat surprising announcement that he would also sit out Stanford's bowl game to prepare for a pro career. It was hard to blame him for sitting out an exhibition to protect himself, but he knew it would bring questions from NFL evaluators about his thought process and commitment to his team.

"I just tell them how it is," McCaffrey said, per ESPN.com. "When they ask, I'm extremely honest with them, and then we move on to now and playing football. I just know I made that decision, it's a career decision, it was a man decision, to try to protect my dream of playing and succeeding in the NFL. And whether it gave me an advantage or not, I stuck with it and I'm here now moving on."

McCaffrey then made clear that he's done talking about the Sun Bowl and eager to talk about the NFL.

"My teammates...every single one of them supported me, had my back," McCaffrey said. "They gave me a little ovation, and I got a lot of love from my teammates. It was one of the toughest decisions I've ever had to make. I was just happy to have a lot of guys who had my back then."

The son of former Broncos wide receiver Ed McCaffrey is one of this draft's most interesting players because of his big-play ability and his ability to play multiple positions.

Though we'll never know what's actually asked and answered in the Scouting Combine's interview sessions, Broncos vice president of football operations John Elway gave an honest answer about McCaffrey's situation when he was asked.

"When I thought about it, kind of the old-school in me wanted to come out saying, 'Why would those guys not play? It's their last game,' this and that," Elway said. "But I tell you what, when you look at where the league is now and talk about the value of these contracts and these players coming out and the risk they're taking, the old salty guy in me got flipped back to understanding."

# After Leonard Fournette & Christian McCaffrey, bypassing bowls could be new normal for top prospects

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 3, 2017

It's a question that threatens to upend the competitiveness and prove the lack of necessity of college postseason bowl games: Should players with legitimate draft prospects simply sit out their bowls rather than risk injury in a game that has no bearing on title hopes that had sailed away at least one month earlier?

Leonard Fournette did.

After a season plagued by ankle issues that caused him to miss four of LSU's 11 regular-season games, Fournette opted to sit out the Tigers' Citrus Bowl appearance against Louisville. His absence didn't affect his team; it won 29-9. But it did spur plenty of public debate -- which he sought to deflect Thursday.

No team had asked about it, Fournette said. But he already had his answer ready.

"Like my normal answer: ask Coach O (LSU coach Ed Orgeron) about the whole situation," he said. "I'll tell them I take credit for it too. It doesn't matter."

Christian McCaffrey did.

When the Stanford running back opted to sit out the Cardinal's Sun Bowl game against North Carolina, it raised eyebrows; unlike Fournette, McCaffrey's season was dominated by gaudy numbers, not by injuries.

His decision saw him receive a standing ovation from his teammates.

"I got a lot of love from my teammates. That was one of the toughest decisions I've ever had to make," he said. "I was just real lucky to have a bunch of guys who have my back during it."

Unlike Fournette, McCaffrey said he had been asked by teams about his decision.

"It was a man decision, to try to protect my dream of playing and succeeding in the NFL. Whether it gave me an advantage or not, I stuck with it. I'm here now moving on, that's probably all I'll talk about that anymore. I'm moving on to NFL football now."

McCaffrey can move on to the NFL. So will Michigan tight end Jake Butt. But his path will have a short-term delay because of the torn ACL he suffered in the Wolverines' Orange Bowl loss to Florida State.

Butt's injury why Fournette and McCaffrey made their decisions -- and why others seem likely to follow in the years to come.

What those players will find among coaches and executives is more understanding of the decision to bypass the bowl game than seemed possible.

For example, note the evolution of Executive Vice President/General Manager John Elway's perspective.

"You know what? I understand it now," he said. "When I thought about it, kind of the old school in me wanted to come out and say, 'Why would those guys not play? It's their last game,' this and that.

"But I tell you what -- when you look at where the league is now, and you talk about the value of these contracts of these players coming out and the risk that they're taking -- the old salty guy got flipped back to understanding why they didn't play."

The choices made by McCaffrey and Fournette will not hurt them one bit -- and could set a new paradigm for top prospects.

# Colorado at the Combine: CU's Liufau driven to prove NFL talent

By Ben Swanson  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 3, 2017

Sefo Liufau knows he needs to take any opportunity available to him to prove he can play in the NFL.

The former Colorado quarterback has heard the questions he must answer about his throwing ability, so Liufau signed up to throw to running backs, defensive backs and linebackers at the Combine to put more repetitions in front of coaches' eyes.

"I think the biggest question coming in — and honestly one of my weaknesses — is being able to be consistently accurate," Liufau said. "I think that's really big for me and showing teams that I can go out there and I can throw the ball [with] great consistency."

After helping drive his Buffaloes to their best season in 15 years to cap his collegiate career, Liufau is relentlessly driven to show scouts and NFL coaches that he can grow beyond what's on his tape and transition to the next level.

"The biggest thing is accuracy and that comes from getting my shoulders and my feet in the right spot and being able to do it subconsciously and being able to do it consistently all the time," Liufau said. "In the NFL, I think the first thing is probably accuracy. You can probably flip on the tape and I make a lot of great throws, and on the flip side you can see a lot of throws that are like, 'What the heck? This guy sucks!' So [my focus is] just being able to be consistent and get the ball to my playmakers."

Throwing to other position groups throughout the week is just the most recent step for Liufau, who has been working out in Portland, Oregon, to prepare for the Combine, the upcoming Colorado Pro Day and his NFL future. Liufau also had the opportunity to show his progress at the Senior Bowl in front of the Chicago Bears' coaching staff, which coached the North team, and numerous scouts from around the league.

Analysts do not anticipate Liufau's name to be called during the draft's first two days, but through his work to shore up his mechanics and consistency, he could quiet the skeptics and make the impression that drives an NFL team to take a flier on him with a late-round selection.

"[I can quiet questions about my arm talent] just by showing it here and at the Pro Day next Wednesday," he said. "And when I hopefully get the opportunity to possibly make a team, show it in camp. I think the most important people to impress are those teams and they know that's what my goal is."

# Christian McCaffrey's versatility helps him stand out to Broncos in crowded RB class

By Aric DiLalla  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 3, 2017

The 2017 draft class has its fair share of impressive running back prospects.

From Leonard Fournette to Dalvin Cook, there are plenty of options for teams in need of a steady back.

And Christian McCaffrey said he thinks he's a better option than any of them.

"I don't think there's anybody else that can do all the things I can," McCaffrey said Thursday from his media availability at the NFL Combine, "as far as [how I] run between the tackles, outside, pass protect and play X, Z, slot and do a lot of stuff in the return game, as well. I think that's what sets me apart."

That versatility has caught the attention of the Broncos' brass, which interviewed McCaffrey on Wednesday evening.

For McCaffrey, the meeting room was full of familiar faces. He's long known John Elway as more than just the Broncos' Executive Vice President of Football Operations and General Manager. Elway's also the former teammate of Christian's father, Ed McCaffrey.

At the Combine, though, their meeting was business oriented as Broncos executives and coaches tried to determine whether McCaffrey could provide a needed boost to an offense that has other needs, as well.

"It was awesome," McCaffrey said. "It was really cool. These are guys that my dad played with, guys that I've been around my whole entire life. It was a really cool meeting."

While the specifics of the meetings were not disclosed, McCaffrey faces general questions about how his game translates to the NFL. There are concerns about his ability to bear the load as an every-down back, and he'll face a slew of other questions this week.

During his media availability, though, McCaffrey said he doesn't doubt that he can be an every-down player for a team and that he has "no idea" why his ability to transition to the NFL is in question.

"I play with a chip on my shoulder always," he said. "I feel like a lot of people don't give me credit for my skills and talents and that's just the way it is, but I also don't really care too much. I don't feel like I'm crazy disrespected. I have a chip on my shoulder at all times. That's been my whole life. I'm constantly trying to prove myself."

He certainly drew attention while at Stanford, though. Especially in the leadup to the previous season, his name was on every Heisman short list after a sophomore year that saw him rush for 2,019 yards and eight touchdowns. While he fell short of those lofty expectations, he tacked on another 1,603 yards on nearly 100 fewer carries in 2016. He also bumped his touchdown production up from eight to 13.

And as he mentioned often to the dozens of media members surrounding his table, he feels he won't just be limited to the run game with whichever team that decides to spend a high draft pick to get him. That selection could come as early as the middle of the first round of April's draft.

"Something I really pride myself on is not just being a running back, not just being a running back that can catch the ball, but if I move out to the slot, I become a receiver," McCaffrey said. "If I move out to X or Z, I become a receiver, not just a running back. I really try to pride myself on route running, catching and being able to be a mismatch anywhere on the field."

At Stanford, he certainly proved to be just that. He piled up more than 1,000 combined receiving yards in three seasons with the Cardinal and was always a threat to break free for a score. He had a touchdown of at least 50 yards in each of his seasons in Palo Alto.

McCaffrey's game, however, extends far beyond his abilities as a running back and wide receiver.

As a sophomore, McCaffrey returned 15 punts for a routine 8.6-yard average, but his willingness to make big plays could be appealing to Broncos fans. In his career with Stanford, he returned 34 punts and called for no fair catches.

Even the threat of a McCaffrey return could make all the difference on special teams. After his sophomore campaign, teams stopped kicking to him during his final year at Stanford. His opportunities dropped from 1.07 punt returns per game to 0.91, and his chances to return kickoffs plummeted from 2.64 per game to 1.27.

That fear of an opposing returner completely changed opponents' game plans and set the Cardinal up with good field position on a regular basis. In the AFC West, which features a similar player in the Chiefs' Tyreek Hill, a player like McCaffrey could swing the field position battle and, in turn, the game.

But forget the consistency McCaffrey provides on special teams or the way an opponent may change its game to combat him. The 6-foot running back is more focused on his ability to make the home-run play.

"I think there's just a lot of big plays open in the return game," McCaffrey said. "You see special teams have such an impact on the game today, and a lot of times it gets taken for granted. So any time I can have the ball in my hands, I feel like I can do something dangerous.

"That's really why I love the return game, because there's so much space in front of you and there's another opportunity to make a big play."

Whether in Denver or elsewhere, McCaffrey expects to do just that.

If he does, it won't matter how crowded the draft class is for running backs.

Christian McCaffrey will stand out.