

Broncos top targets in free agency should be: Tony Romo, Kevin Zeitler and Calais Campbell

By Mark Kiszla
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Paxton Lynch as the Broncos quarterback of the future? Spare me! And unless Trevor Siemian makes unfathomable progress, is he the long-term solution at quarterback? Probably not. I say: Get a decent offensive lineman and sign Tony Romo from Dallas. That's the best hope for the playoffs in 2017.

– Mike, managing as best he can

Kiz: John Elway has more than \$40 million to spend on free agents and draft picks. I'm here to help. My top three targets in free agency are: 1) Romo, whose signing is a no-brainer if he will come to Denver for \$10-12 million; 2) Cincinnati guard Kevin Zeitler, because I'd rather have a Pro Bowler at guard than a place-holder at tackle, and 3) Arizona's Calais Campbell, who could solve Denver's problems in the defensive line. Can't sign 'em all. I'd settle for two of three.

You're you not worried about Romo's injury-prone body? Could you explain, please?

– Foz, not fuzzy-wuzzy

Kiz: If the Broncos sign Romo, they would try to ride back to the Super Bowl on butterfly wings. He's fragile. But let's say Romo breaks on the second snap of his first game. Coach Vance Joseph sends in Lynch, and the Broncos get a peek at their future a little early.

If the price is right, should the Broncos should pick up our old friend Brandon Marshall as a wide receiver, put him opposite Demaryius Thomas and use Emmanuel Sanders in the slot?

– Peter, San Diego

Kiz: This dusty old cowtown isn't big enough for two Brandon Marshalls. There would be angry Broncomaniacs constantly shouting at the wrong B-Marsh for being unpatriotic or dropping touchdown passes. Furthermore, Brandon the Receiver has been unable to hold onto a job in Denver, Miami, Chicago and New York. Maybe his next gig should be as the third clown in the car of those Sonic Drive-In commercials.

General manager Joe Sakic is not the Avalanche's problem. You've always liked to blame everything on him, even when he was a player you talked about trading him all the time. What is wrong with you?

– Adriana

Kiz: Au contraire, ma cherie. In fact, 20 years ago, I was the dude who personally broke the news to Avalanche owner Charlie Lyons that the New York Rangers were trying to steal Sakic away with a three-year, \$21 million offer. Lyons dropped the phone in shock. But he paid to keep Sakic, who still hasn't thanked me.

Everyone's a keyboard general manager. Have you ever laced up a pair of skates, Kiz?

– Jimmy, the jet-setter

Kiz: Have I ever laced up skates? Of course. In fact, I'm trying out for Disney on Ice when the show comes to town. Figure I'm a natural as Aladdin, because I've always looked good in parachute pants. Wish me luck!

And today's parting shot is an objection to the image of an old man skating around the Denver Coliseum with a bare mid-drift as Aladdin.

OK, that is not the vision I wanted over breakfast. Stick with skiing, Kiz. Please.

– Connie, can't un-see it

John Elway has money to burn in free agency. Who will get it?

By Nicki Jhabvala
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John Elway didn't say the four-letter word, but everyone else did.

"You know, the prevailing wisdom is you're going to sign a veteran quarterback," he recounted being told Wednesday while meeting with a small contingent of reporters at the NFL combine here.

"Whose prevailing wisdom," he countered, "is that? That is, everyone in the league thinks you're going to be a player."

"Then," he added with a wide grin and a chuckle, "I guess I should."

The Broncos general manager was willing to play along because he knows how this game works.

Specifically, he knows that the only four letters people think of when they see him now are R-O-M-O.

The Broncos enter a wild but important offseason, arguably the most important of Elway's tenure as a Denver executive, as he searches for his quarterback for now and the future, revamps an offense that fell flat last season and looks to right a franchise that, statistically, got off course in 2016.

The Super Bowl 50 victors were mere bystanders for this past season's playoffs. Now, with 10 draft picks and more than \$40 million in salary-cap space, Elway and Co. have plenty to work with to find more star power, more talent and more help on both sides of the ball. It starts this week, when the free-agency negotiation period begins Tuesday and players can officially sign new deals Thursday. Elway, the man of many surprises, will be a player in some capacity.

"I'll say this: We're going to look at all the options," he said. "Once they become available, we're going to look at all the options. ... Because it's not only about winning next year; it's also about what it does to the future, too."

But his strategy ultimately depends on the pieces at his disposal.

The what if?

Elway and Broncos coach Vance Joseph have said repeatedly that they're happy with their two young quarterbacks, Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch. They've said repeatedly that they will hold another quarterback competition to find their 2017 starter. And they've said repeatedly that they want to develop the two for the future.

But it's what they're not saying that is generating more interest.

The elephant in the room is Tony Romo, not yet a free agent and, as of now, not available to be had. He's under contract with Dallas — a really big contract — that includes \$14 million in salary next season and cap charges of \$24.7 million, \$25.2 million and \$23.7 million over the next three years, respectively.

Romo is a Cowboy until owner Jerry Jones says he's not and agrees to either trade or release him.

"This is now Dak Prescott's team, but it can't fully become Dak Prescott's until Tony Romo is no longer on the roster," said former agent and CBS Sports contract analyst Joel Corry. "And Romo doesn't want to be a backup quarterback, so you're creating a situation that could potentially blow up in their face."

So then it becomes: Do the Cowboys shop him? Or release him? Both plans require the Cowboys to eat at least \$19.6 million in dead money. If they release or trade him before June 1, Dallas will have that \$19.6 million on their books for 2017, severely limiting their options in free agency. If they designate Romo a post-June 1 release, they can split the dead money over two seasons.

"The trade value and the number of teams that are interested in him may make it that they may just release him anyway, because what are you going to get for Romo, who's an aging quarterback with durability concerns?" Corry said. "You're not going to get a high draft pick for him. Brett Favre went for what was a (third-round pick) — it was a conditional fourth that elevated to a third — so that would be your best-case scenario, something like that."

Romo will have suitors beyond Denver if he's made available. The most intriguing suitor, perhaps, is Houston, the team that spent big on Brock Osweiler a year ago and seemingly regrets it. But there are also Chicago, where Jay Cutler is out, and Kansas City, who could possibly want more out of their quarterback than what they've received from Alex Smith.

"It really comes down to Denver and Houston to me, and I tip the scales of balance in Denver, just because it's easier for them to do it," Corry said. "They have a lot more cap room. They should have more flexibility salary-wise with Romo."

The beauty in the Broncos' situation is their biggest cap hit of 2017 is linebacker Von Miller, at \$20.4 million. Only two other Broncos reach eight figures — receiver Demaryius Thomas and cornerback Aqib Talib, each of whom has charges of about \$12 million. Denver's two quarterbacks eat up all of \$2.8 million combined.

And it's possible, as Corry spelled out in a mock contract for Romo, to take advantage of incentives and roster and play-time bonuses to keep Romo's cap charge low on a new contract. This would make it more "team-friendly," allowing the Broncos to hold onto their current two quarterbacks for assurance, while leaving plenty of room to make those so-called "splash" signings elsewhere.

"You can get Romo where it shouldn't cost more than \$6 million on the cap. You can make a splurge signing and get Tony Romo. They're not mutually exclusive concepts," Corry said. "The one thing about Romo is you better upgrade that offensive line because he couldn't stay healthy behind that great Dallas line, so unless you have significant upgrades to a shaky offensive line, then you better not trade Siemian because you may need him."

Frustration in trenches

Frustrated? Sure, you could say Elway has been a bit frustrated by the offensive line play over the last two seasons. He said it.

Last year he signed veteran tackles Russell Okung and Donald Stephenson with the belief he had made upgrades, only to realize through injuries and inconsistency that his front five took a step back, to rank 24th among the league's offensive lines, by Pro Football Focus.

"I think it comes down to money, too. It's not a bottomless pit," Elway said. "There's only so many things we can do."

The Broncos declined Okung's option that would have engaged four more years for \$48 million, but there's interest in bringing him back on a smaller deal. Stephenson has two years left on his contract, but he could be released for a savings of \$3 million.

The 2017 draft class is especially weak on offensive tackles, and the free-agent market isn't much better. Perhaps the most notable name is a 35-year-old who was in Cincinnati when Joseph was their defensive backs coach for two seasons. Andrew Whitworth is older but still playing at a Pro Bowl clip and will be on the market come March 9. His next deal?

"Oh, it's going to be a short-term deal, probably in the \$9 million-, \$10 million-, \$11 million-per-year range because he's still a Pro Bowl guy," Corry said. "He's still playing at a high level."

The Broncos' personnel will also be dictated by their vision up front. Joseph and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy see a mix of zone-blocking and power up front, which could lead to a shuffle in personnel. Center Matt Paradis, who is recovering from two hip surgeries, appears to be the only lineman with a hold on his starting job. The others are movable and replaceable.

Therefore, Packers guard T.J. Lang or Cowboys guard Ron Leary could be coveted — and viable — options.

"We're looking there, we're going to look everywhere," Elway said of landing a guard. "Again, it comes back to what the market's going to be and we're always trying to find the right fit for us."

The Broncos' cap cushion gives them money to burn on the defensive end, too, a side of the ball Elway wants to not only maintain but improve. And the run defense needs it.

The Broncos fell from third against the run in 2015 to 28th last season. Their pass rush is deep, even with the potential loss of DeMarcus Ware, who struggled to stay healthy. But plugging the holes against the run is a priority.

The biggest name on the market to help there is Calais Campbell, the former South High standout who became a force for the Cardinals and will land a contract to match. But there's also Brandon Williams, the Ravens' run-stuffing nose-tackle who could be a perfect fit in Denver's 3-4.

"If you're going to do the splurge signing on the defense, I'd go get Brandon Williams over Calais Campbell because he's younger," Corry said. "Calais is in his 30s, early 30s, and Williams is coming off his rookie contract. That would be my splurge signing."

The cost?

“Everyone talks Damon Harrison (five years, \$46.3 million with the Giants), but Michael Brockers’ deal for \$11 million per year to re-up with the Rams (three years, \$33.1 million) in September with \$24 million guaranteed — I look at that as the floor,” Corry said.

The current roster

Poring over the potential new talent is only the half of it as the Broncos enter free agency. Determining the value and need for the current slate is just as significant. Ware, Corry believes, may return to Dallas, where there’s a greater need for pass-rushers. In Denver, he’s a luxury.

Broncos nose tackle Sylvester Williams wants to test the open market and will. Cornerback Kayvon Webster will, too.

But inside linebacker Todd Davis, a restricted free agent, still awaits his fate. He will probably receive a second-round tender worth about \$2.8 million for one year. He will be able to negotiate with other teams, but the second-round pick offers Denver security after they were burned by running back C.J. Anderson, who signed an \$18 million offer sheet after getting a low-round tender.

Kicker Brandon McManus is also a restricted free agent and will probably receive a second-round tender to get keep him in the fold.

As the new pieces land on the table, old ones will have to be swapped out. Help in free agency, or the draft, will put some veterans on notice, such as tight end Virgil Green, who is up against a deep tight-end draft class.

But the free agency game starts Thursday. The Broncos could be one big piece — quarterback? — away. They could be a few pieces away.

“Free agency is there for a reason, “ Elway said. “We’re always looking for value in free agency, which is sometimes hard to do. I think that we can supplement some needs that we have through free agency because I don’t like going into the draft with big needs.

“We have to get better offensively, and this is the time of year that we have to get better.”

The free-agency negotiating period starts Tuesday, meaning unrestricted free agents can agree to new deals with teams but cannot sign contracts until Thursday. Following is a list of potential targets for the Broncos.

OFFENSIVE LINE

Andrew Whitworth, LT

Whitworth is 35, but still a force. He said recently that he expects to stay in Cincinnati but wants to test free agency. He played on a one-year, \$9 million contract extension last year, and surrendered only 14 quarterback pressures, per Pro Football Focus.

Russell Okung, LT

The Broncos declined his option but are still interested in signing him with a smaller deal. Okung, 29, wants to hit the market and is said to have multiple teams interested in him.

Ronald Leary, G

Leary, 27, reassumed his starting job at guard last season with the Cowboys. According to PFF, Leary didn't yield a sack and finished the regular season rated 21st among all guards. Spotrac calculated his market value at \$9.1 million in average salary.

T.J. Lang, G

The 29-year-old Pro Bowl guard had hip surgery in January and, while he could return to the Packers, he wants to test the market. Lang didn't surrender a sack or a hit on Aaron Rodgers in 13 games last season, per PFF.

DEFENSIVE LINE

Brandon Williams, DT

Ravens coach John Harbaugh said the team won't use the franchise tag on Williams, making him available to teams in need of a run-stuffing nose tackle. Spotrac projects Williams, 28, is worth \$12.9 million in average annual salary.

Calais Campbell, DT

The 30-year-old Denver native is viewed as one of the top defensive linemen on the market, standing 6-foot-8, 300 pounds. He will command a hefty price.

Chris Baker, DT

Baker, 29, is big (6-foot-2, 320 pounds) for the Broncos' 3-4 defense. But he's been a consistent force on the line for the Redskins the last two seasons.

Bennie Logan, DT

Logan, 27, morphed into one of the Eagles' top run-stuffers and would do well as a nose tackle in Denver's 3-4 defense. Philadelphia has limited cap space and may have trouble keeping him.

Broncos face challenge of big need with short list of solutions in OL

By Jeff Legwold

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It is the third consecutive offseason the Denver Broncos have gone to Indianapolis for the scouting combine with a makeover in the offensive line on their football drawing board.

The third consecutive offseason when the Broncos have tried to balance between the money they have, the salary-cap space available and the needs they want to fill. And this time around the Broncos are faced with the prospect of doing it in a year when neither the draft nor the free agency crop is considered all that deep overall at the position.

With all of that staring him in the face, executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway says he's more than ready to stop the trend and put the right group together.

"I hoped we would have been a little more solid than we have been," Elway said. "I wanted to play better last year than we played in the offensive line. I thought with Russell [Okung] coming in and Donald Stephenson coming in, I thought we would have played a little better in the offensive line than we did. It's an area of concern for us. I continue to work on it. That's my goal to make it right."

The Broncos have used eight draft picks in Elway's previous six drafts on the job on offensive linemen and just one -- center Matt Paradis -- could be an unquestioned starter headed toward the 2017 season. And last offseason, Elway had even made it the Broncos' top priority in free agency when he signed Okung and Stephenson to deals.

And once again it didn't work, at least as well as the Broncos had hoped. Neither Okung nor Stephenson played as well as the Broncos had hoped as the team struggled both to protect its quarterbacks and consistently run the ball. In a 9-7 finish -- their first playoff miss since 2010 -- the Broncos finished the season 27th in rushing, 27th in total offense and 22nd in scoring as Okung and Stephenson closed out the year tied for the team lead in penalties.

The rather significant rub is this draft class is not deep in potential walk-in starters among the offensive linemen, especially at tackle, and it is not deep in free agency either. That means the players who are not yet 30, have been starters and have been largely injury free will command top dollar.

It's part of the reason why the Broncos, who told Okung they would not pay him an option bonus that kicked in an additional four years of his contract that included \$21 million in guaranteed money, are still going to talk to Okung about returning at a reduced rate.

"I think it comes down to money, it's not a bottomless pit, so there's only so many things we can do," Elway said. "As I said ... that's not saying [Okung is] not going to be back ... Russell is someone we'd like to continue to talk to."

The Broncos could be looking for as many as three or four new starters up front as Paradis may be the only “given” and even he is coming off surgery on each hip.

Broncos offensive coordinator Mike McCoy, along with newly hired offensive line coach Jeff Davidson, have some say in the Broncos’ search as well. McCoy said he’d like to be flexible enough on offense to play the zone blocking scheme – linemen fire out together and block defenders in a certain area – at times as well as man-on-man schemes when blockers have specific defenders to block.

Elway said at the combine the team’s personnel department needs to be aware of what kinds of players the coaches will need to make sure the right fits are found.

“We have to draft to something, I’m not sure what we do best yet,” Elway said. “ ... You’ve got Matt, who’s probably more of a zone center, and Max [Garcia], who’s probably more of a gap guard. We’ve got to find the best of both worlds and put them all together.”

But free agency opens in four days and the best of the offensive line group figure to have agreed to new contracts within the first 48 hours. It’s all of what Elway and the Broncos are juggling as they search for “value” – Elway’s most-used word in free agency – and players who can make a difference.

“Hopefully we play the best five and hopefully see improvement,” Elway said. “ ... We’re going to look everywhere. ... Again, it comes back to what the market is going to be. The value piece, the money piece.”

Predictions on the top free agent for each NFL team

By NFL Nation Staff

ESPN.com

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Will the Patriots re-sign Dont'a Hightower, or will he get a better offer elsewhere? What about Brandon Williams and the Ravens? Alshon Jeffery and the Bears?

NFL Nation reporters predict the outcomes for the biggest internal free agents on the teams they cover.

NFC East

Dallas Cowboys

Guard Ronald Leary

Leary will be one of the more sought-after offensive linemen on the market. With Tyron Smith and Travis Frederick among the highest-paid offensive linemen in the league and right guard Zack Martin looking at a mega-extension as soon as this summer, the chances of the Cowboys keeping Leary are slim. Prediction: With La'el Collins returning from a toe injury, the Cowboys have a starter ready to go. So, it's time to say goodbye to Leary, who played extremely well in his three seasons as a starter after signing as an undrafted free agent. -- Todd Archer

New York Giants

Defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins

The Giants want Hankins back. It's going to be tough, however, with Jason Pierre-Paul occupying almost \$17 million of cap space on the franchise tag. The Giants will get to work and find a solution to keep their defense together. It's what they are trying to accomplish this offseason. Prediction: JPP gets a long-term deal, and Hankins gets re-signed, making the New York defensive line a force now and into the future. -- Jordan Raanan

Philadelphia Eagles

Defensive tackle Bennie Logan

The Eagles would prefer to keep Logan, but after sinking huge money into Fletcher Cox last offseason, it would be difficult to justify allocating so many resources to the defensive tackle position when there are other areas of need on the team. Prediction: Chances are, the price tag Logan commands in the free-agent market will be too rich for Philly. -- Tim McManus

Washington Redskins

Wide receiver Pierre Garcon

Garcon spent five seasons in Washington and was known for his toughness and consistency. At age 30, he's coming off a season in which he caught 79 passes for 1,041 yards and three touchdowns. He was the team's most consistent receiver. The Redskins, however, haven't made much of an attempt (read: none) to bring back Garcon. There's a good chance they'll lose DeSean Jackson, too. But Garcon's exit, at this time, is more clear. He'll have multiple suitors as well, so his price tag could be more than Washington wants to pay. Prediction: Garcon is gone. -- John Keim

NFC North

Chicago Bears

Wide receiver Alshon Jeffery

The Bears declined to use the franchise tag on Jeffery for a second consecutive year, and now Jeffery could get a big deal when he hits free agency. Bears management made no effort to re-sign Jeffery in recent weeks. Chicago has exclusive negotiating rights with Jeffery until March 7, but Jeffery wants to test the open market. Prediction: He is expected to find several interested teams in free agency and is likely to leave Chicago. -- Jeff Dickerson

Detroit Lions

Guard Larry Warford

Warford, Detroit's best offensive lineman over the past four seasons, is projected to be one of the top guards in free agency. He's a fantastic run-blocker who holds up well against the pass, too, and will bring in a lot of money. That said, the Lions have two potential Warford replacements on the roster in Joe Dahl and former first-round pick Laken Tomlinson. If the Lions feel one of those players can win the job and be productive, they would likely get pushed out of a bidding derby for Warford. Prediction: Warford will sign elsewhere. -- Michael Rothstein

Green Bay Packers

Running back Eddie Lacy

The Packers want Lacy back but likely under a short-term, prove-it type contract that could be loaded with incentives. It only takes one team to believe he can get back to being the 1,100-yard running back he was in 2013 and 2014. Prediction: In the end, some teams might be scared off by the ankle injury that limited Lacy to just five games last season and concerns over his weight, making it more likely that he'll be back for another run with the Packers. -- Rob Demovsky

Minnesota Vikings

Running back Adrian Peterson

The Vikings declined Peterson's 2017 option Monday, meaning he'll become an unrestricted free agent on March 9 unless the team works out a new deal with him ahead of time. It seems likely the Vikings will attend to their offensive line needs before considering bringing Peterson back, and the soon-to-be 32-year-old running back might find a new suitor in that time. Prediction: Under the logic that prominent

veterans are often likely to take pay cuts with new teams instead of staying with their original teams on reduced contracts, the guess here is Peterson will move on. -- Ben Goessling

NFC South

Atlanta Falcons

Fullback Patrick DiMarco

The one-time Pro Bowler is a key figure in the offense as a lead blocker for running backs Devonta Freeman and Tevin Coleman, but the Falcons won't overpay at that position. Prediction: DiMarco ends up reuniting with former Falcons offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan, now the coach of the 49ers. -- Vaughn McClure

Carolina Panthers

Offensive tackle Mike Remmers

The Panthers already have used the franchise tag on defensive tackle Kawann Short and re-signed ends Mario Addison and Wes Horton. They want to bring back end Charles Johnson and wide receiver Ted Ginn Jr., too. But the intriguing free agent is Remmers, who moved from right to left tackle when Michael Oher missed the final 13 games with a concussion. Because of Oher's situation, the Panthers are having to take a more serious look at keeping Remmers for continuity and depth. Prediction: The Panthers will bring back Remmers if the price is right. -- David Newton

New Orleans Saints

Defensive tackle Nick Fairley

Fairley's market value is tough to predict. The former first-round pick just had a stellar season with the Saints in 2016, including a career-high 6.5 sacks and 22 quarterback hits, so he should be in line for a healthy payday. But teams have shied away from investing heavily in him in the past because he struggled with injuries, and there were questions about his maturity and work ethic early in his career. Fairley had to settle for one-year, prove-it deals in each of the past two seasons. The Saints have other options at tackle, including last year's first-round pick Sheldon Rankins. Prediction: The guess is that Fairley re-signs somewhere between \$6 million and \$8 million per year because it was such a good fit for both sides last season. -- Mike Triplett

Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Quarterback Mike Glennon

Glennon, who hasn't started a game in two seasons, is one of the top quarterbacks on the market. The Bucs will likely try to re-sign him, but they won't pay him above what a backup would warrant. Glennon should be able to get more elsewhere with a team that would allow him to compete for a starting job. So sure, it'd be great for the Bucs to re-sign Glennon and keep a reliable backup, but that's unlikely. Prediction: He'll sign somewhere else for more money. -- Jenna Laine

NFC West

Arizona Cardinals

Defensive tackle Calais Campbell

In his contract year in 2016, Campbell turned in one of the best all-around seasons of his career with 8 sacks, 53 tackles, 3 fumble recoveries, 2 forced fumbles and one interception returned for a touchdown. Talk about timing. He'll likely be able to parlay his play into another big payday, despite the fact that he'll be 31 in September. Prediction: That payday likely won't come from the Cardinals, simply because another team will pay him more than what Arizona will offer. His services will be in high demand come March 9, and there are teams that need significant help on the defensive line. -- Josh Weinfuss

Los Angeles Rams

Wide receiver Kenny Britt

The 28-year-old is coming off a career year, one that saw him turn 110 targets into 1,002 yards, becoming the Rams' first 1,000-yard receiver since 2007. It's perfect timing for Britt, but it doesn't mean he'll return for a fourth season with the Rams. The Rams, under new coach Sean McVay, are expected to move on to other free-agent receivers. Alshon Jeffery is the major prize, but the next tier -- DeSean Jackson, Pierre Garcon, Terrelle Pryor Sr., Kenny Stills and others -- seems to make more sense. Prediction: In all likelihood, Britt will find work elsewhere. -- Alden Gonzalez

San Francisco 49ers

Quarterback Colin Kaepernick

Kaepernick is opting out of the final year of his contract and will now get his first taste of free agency. He's coming off a 2016 season in which he finished in the middle of the pack in passer rating but posted a strong touchdown-to-interception ratio and led all quarterbacks in yards per carry. He also garnered a lot of attention for his decision to protest racial inequality by kneeling during the national anthem. General manager John Lynch, coach Kyle Shanahan and Kaepernick had an open conversation recently, and the sides agreed to leave the door open for a possible Kaepernick return. Prediction: It seems more likely that all parties are going to opt for a fresh start. -- Nick Wagoner

Seattle Seahawks

Kicker Steven Hauschka

Hauschka hasn't been at the level of some of the top kickers in the NFL, but he has performed well for the Seahawks during his six-season career. Since the start of 2015, Hauschka has missed 10 extra points, and coach Pete Carroll said last season that Hauschka was kicking the ball too low. Prediction: Given that the Seahawks have already added Blair Walsh, they likely have concluded that they don't want to pay Hauschka what top-10 kickers make -- more than \$3 million per season. And that's the right call. -- Sheil Kapadia

AFC East

Buffalo Bills

Cornerback Stephon Gilmore

After not assigning the franchise tag to Gilmore, it is hard to see the Bills coughing up the sort of deal required to keep him. He was firm last summer about his perceived value as one of the NFL's best cornerbacks, and after a somewhat disappointing 2016 season, the Bills would be wise to not pay Gilmore elite money. They have extended several of their young players in recent years -- Cordy Glenn, Jerry Hughes, Marcell Dareus and others -- but cannot keep everyone. Prediction: Gilmore will sign a big deal elsewhere. -- Mike Rodak

Miami Dolphins

Wide receiver Kenny Stills

Stills is a talented, young receiver who led Miami in touchdown receptions last season with nine. He is hitting the market at the right time, as Pro Bowl receiver Antonio Brown just set a new ceiling for the position at \$17 million per year. Stills may be able to get in the \$10-\$12 million range, and that could be too rich for the Dolphins, who also have work to do with teammate and fellow receiver Jarvis Landry's contract. Prediction: The price will be too high for the Dolphins to bring back Stills. -- James Walker

New England Patriots

Linebacker Dont'a Hightower

While the Patriots elected not to restrict Hightower with the franchise or transition tag, he remains a top priority to the team. Hightower will have the freedom to fully explore the free-agent market, but he plans to maintain an open dialogue with Bill Belichick & Co. In the end, the Patriots will likely have a chance to match any offer Hightower receives, and thus, it is a situation where the market will ultimately dictate what happens. So, will another team step up with an offer the Patriots aren't willing to match? It's tough to project, but I'm putting this one in the category of safety Devin McCourty's free-agency situation from two seasons ago. Prediction: Hightower will be back with the Patriots on a lucrative but not over-the-top contract after going through the same process McCourty did. -- Mike Reiss

New York Jets

Quarterback Geno Smith

A return is "not out of the question," Smith said. He has two things going for him: He's young (26) and cheap. Knee rehab could complicate his timetable. Prediction: Realistically, he'll probably move on to another team, but he can't be totally dismissed from the Jets' plans. -- Rich Cimini

AFC North

Baltimore Ravens

Defensive tackle Brandon Williams

Considered one of the top free agents in the league, Williams recently said his future with the Ravens remains "up in the air." Ravens officials have stressed the need to hold on to Williams, and despite losing some young talent in free agency in recent years, Baltimore has a strong history of re-signing the players the team is focused on keeping. The Ravens could have a difficult time re-signing Williams, however, if another team offers more than what the Giants gave defensive tackle Damon Harrison (\$46.25 million over five years, including \$24 million guaranteed) last year. Prediction: While no one can rule out Baltimore re-signing Williams, the more likely scenario is he'll be lured elsewhere. -- Jamison Hensley

Cincinnati Bengals

Guard Kevin Zeitler

Zeitler is one of the top guards on the free-agent market -- and he'll likely be paid for it. The Bengals value tackles over guards, and with left tackle Andrew Whitworth also a pending free agent, he'll likely be their top priority. Prediction: Expect Zeitler to be in another uniform next fall and to be paid like one of the best guards in the NFL. -- Katherine Terrell

Cleveland Browns

Wide receiver Terrelle Pryor Sr.

The Browns' efforts to sign Pryor to an extension have not worked out, and he will test the market. There, he will learn that it only takes one team to make a player wealthy. Prediction: Pryor will leave -- and leave a gaping need at receiver for the Browns. -- Pat McManamon

Pittsburgh Steelers

Linebacker Lawrence Timmons

The Steelers are exploring re-signing Timmons but aren't expected to break the bank for him while he tests the market. Timmons just played out a sizable five-year deal, and though he was productive in 2016, he turns 31 in May. The team also has good inside linebacker depth with Ryan Shazier and Vince Williams. Timmons was the first draft pick of the Mike Tomlin era and wants to finish his career in Pittsburgh. Prediction: Here's to both sides finding common ground on a reasonable contract for two to three years. -- Jeremy Fowler

AFC South

Houston Texans

Cornerback A.J. Bouye

Bouye was a pleasant surprise for the Texans in 2016, entering the year as the team's No. 4 cornerback and finishing as one of the top corners in the league. While the Texans have said they would love to have the young cornerback re-sign, they already have three solid cornerbacks under contract, and

another team could reward Bouye with a much bigger contract than he could get in Houston. If the Texans re-sign Bouye, it would leave very little wiggle room for other improvements and to re-sign other free agents. Prediction: The financials to bring back Bouye will likely not add up for the Texans. -- Sarah Barshop

Indianapolis Colts

Cornerback Darius Butler

Butler was one of the few positives on a weak Colts defense last season. He's their best slot cornerback, and he has led them in interceptions in three of the past five seasons. Butler presented a bonus last season when he shifted to safety at times. His versatility gives the Colts some flexibility if they decide not to re-sign veteran safety Mike Adams, who will turn 36 years old later this month. Prediction: The Colts will re-sign Butler. -- Mike Wells

Jacksonville Jaguars

Cornerback Prince Amukamara

Defensive coordinator Todd Wash was pleased with the way Amukamara played in 2016, even though Amukamara didn't put up big numbers (six pass breakups, no interceptions). It doesn't appear the Jaguars are making a big run to re-sign Amukamara, however. They need a No. 2 corner opposite Jalen Ramsey, and they may have their sights set a little higher than Amukamara (The Texans' A.J. Bouye, perhaps). Prediction: Signing Amukamara could require a deal around \$10 million annually, and the Jaguars might feel it would be better to spend a little more to try to land Bouye. -- Mike DiRocco

Tennessee Titans

Wide receiver Kendall Wright

The Titans don't view Wright as a big target, but other teams that covet a slot type might find him enticing in the receiver market. He made \$7 million on his fifth-year option last season, and both sides have all but said he won't be back. The Titans deactivated him for the regular-season finale, and he tearily spoke of his five seasons in Tennessee on locker clean-out day. Prediction: A change of scenery is likely to be mutually beneficial. -- Paul Kuharsky

AFC West

Denver Broncos

Outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware

The Broncos' three most prominent free agents are all on defense -- Ware, nose tackle Sylvester Williams and defensive end Vance Walker. Of the three, the Broncos would have interest in bringing Walker and Ware back. Ware is an intriguing case given his standing in the league -- he's in the exclusive 100-sack club -- his age (34) and the fact he's coming off back surgery. Broncos coach Vance Joseph said at the scouting combine he has had several conversations about bringing back Ware and that the team

would be willing to sign him if he is agreeable to a discussion about playing time and role. Prediction: If Ware is flexible there, he figures to be re-signed. -- Jeff Legwold

Kansas City Chiefs

Defensive lineman Dontari Poe

Coach Andy Reid said recently the Chiefs would like to re-sign Poe, but that seems unlikely. The sides have had plenty of time to reach an agreement on a long-term contract. Poe could attract a lucrative offer from another team once free agency begins, and it's not the Chiefs' way to match even if they're given the chance. They generally don't let another team dictate the terms of a contract they must meet. Prediction: Poe will get a big deal from another team. -- Adam Teicher

Los Angeles Chargers

Running back Danny Woodhead

Even though he played just two games in 2016 due to an ACL injury and turned 32 years old in January, the Chargers would like to bring back Woodhead. He has a good rapport with quarterback Philip Rivers and complements Melvin Gordon's bruising running style as a change-of-pace back who can operate on third downs and in the red zone. New coach Anthony Lynn coached Woodhead while with the Jets, so he's familiar with the cat-quick runner's skill set. Chargers general manager Tom Telesco told reporters at the NFL combine this week that the team is working to bring Woodhead back into the fold for 2017. Prediction: Woodhead will be re-signed. -- Eric D. Williams

Oakland Raiders

Running back Latavius Murray

Murray was a workhorse for the Raiders last season, scoring 12 rushing touchdowns, the third most in a single season in franchise history, even if his touches were down with the arrival of rookies DeAndre Washington and Jalen Richard. Quarterback Derek Carr wants Murray to return, and one would think that would carry much weight. But Murray, a Pro Bowler in 2015 who averaged the same 4.0 yards per carry in 2016, will likely get big-money offers elsewhere. Prediction: If those offers are significantly bigger than Oakland wants to pay, Murray will be a former Raider and Oakland will have a big hole to fill. Adrian Peterson, anyone? -- Paul Gutierrez

Broncos free agency may depend on Romo pursuit

By Mike Klis

9News

March 5, 2017

John Elway may well have two lists of free-agent budgets.

One would have Tony Romo on top of the list, and then a smaller budget for the two offensive linemen and two defensive linemen he seeks. The other would be the “No Romo” list that has a more expansive budget for offensive linemen and defensive linemen.

As it stands now, the Broncos have \$35 million in salary cap room. That doesn’t include the \$2.746 million second-round tenders the Broncos are expected to place on kicker Brandon McManus and inside linebacker Todd Davis. It also doesn’t include the exclusive right free agent deals the Broncos are expected to tender to at least centers Matt Paradis and James Ferentz, receivers Jordan Taylor and Bennie Fowler, linebackers Shaq Barrett and Zaire Anderson and long snapper Casey Kreiter.

In other words, Romo or no Romo, Broncos’ cap guru Mike Sullivan will have to be creative for Elway to make a dent into his wish list.

A look at the Broncos’ five positions of greatest need as the free-agent bargaining period opens Tuesday, with the market officially opening on Thursday:

Romo: Not quarterback, but Romo. The benched Dallas Cowboys star is the only passer who could cause Elway, the Broncos’ general manager, to pass on his current QB group of Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch.

Romo, if he’s released by the Dallas Cowboys, figures to cost \$10 million to \$12 million a year – a good deal considering his current contract calls for \$14 million, \$19.5 million and \$20.5 million in his final three years, but also risky deal considering he turns 37 next month and has played in just four games, plus one series in the past two seasons.

Five years after he signed Peyton Manning, Elway may try to catch quarterback magic again with Romo.

The situations are different, though.

Manning was a considered a better quarterback than Romo is now. As for the Broncos incumbent quarterbacks, Siemian is a far better passer now than Tim Tebow was then.

In other words, there was a far greater gap between Manning and Tebow entering the 2012 season than there would be between the 37-year-old Romo and 25-year-old Siemian.

Still, Elway has already done substantial homework on Romo, an NFL source told 9News. Should the Cowboys release their star quarterback as so many expect, the Broncos would be ready to become among Romo’s suitors – providing Elway makes the final determination to go forward.

The Broncos would not be the only one. There was also buzz here at the NFL Scouting Combine the Houston Texans would also be players for Romo, who has a career 97.1 passer rating and 78-49 record as a starter, but he's also missed 34 games to injury in the last nine seasons, including 19 games the previous two years.

Imagine that, the Texans and Broncos fighting over the same No. 1 quarterback for a second consecutive free agency period. The Texans "won" last year, outbidding the Broncos for Osweiler. Can't win for losing.

The New York Jets, San Francisco, Chicago, Cleveland and Buffalo are also teams in the quarterback market.

Offensive tackle: Cincinnati's Andrew Whitworth, the Broncos' Russell Okung and Jacksonville's Kelvin Beachum are the top left tackles available in free agency. The Broncos aren't looking for a right tackle.

"We want a left tackle," said Broncos head coach Vance Joseph.

Guards: Cincinnati's Kevin Zeitler will command an \$11 million per year contract, which would probably be too rich for the Broncos. Green Bay's T.J. Lang, who is 29, could be had for \$9 million per year. Both are right guards, which is what the Broncos are looking for. The team is set with Max Garcia at left guard.

Defensive tackle: The Broncos need someone to replace Sylvester Williams. They may go with a budget player here and spend their money at the 5 technique, or 3-4 defensive end.

Defensive end: Wouldn't it be cool if the Broncos signed Calais Campbell? He is high on their wish list – perhaps No. 1 on the No Romo list. Born and raised in Denver, Campbell attended Denver South. He is a two-time Pro Bowler and the quintessential 3-4 defensive end.

Problem is, Campbell, who turns 31 on Sept. 1, wants to wind up in Malik Jackson's neighborhood, which is \$14.25 million a year.

Baltimore's Lawrence Guy would be a less expensive alternative, although more than the \$5.5 million Earl Mitchell just received in year one of his contract with the San Francisco 49ers.

Four thoughts on Broncos' free agent race

By Troy Renck

KMGH

March 5, 2017

Before John Elway became a Hall of Famer player and an elite executive, he served as a Yankees farmhand. As a 22-year-old looking to create leverage and steer his draft location, the 22-year-old Elway played outfield for Oneonta in the New York-Penn League.

Elway batted .318 with a .432 on-base percentage and 12 extra-base hits in 41 games. He went errorless on defense. Owner George Steinbrenner viewed him as a core player to revive the Yankees along with first baseman Don Mattingly. The lure of football -- and a trade by the Baltimore Colts -- drew Elway away. But in his short time with The Boss, Elway seemed to take from his business sense. In pinstripes, anything but a championship is a disappointment.

Welcome to the 2017 Broncos. Elway remains the most competitive person I have ever covered. He wants to win. At everything. Fitness. Ping pong. NFL. The Broncos finished outside the playoffs last season, meaning they will break among the first out of the free agent gates on Tuesday when the legal tampering period begins.

The Broncos are seeking upgrades at guard, tackle, defensive end and tackle, and, with increasing likelihood, quarterback. My quick four thoughts on what will be a fluid market place:

1) On Guard

Price and plenty of options make it anticipated that the Broncos will be aggressive in pursuit of a guard. Cincinnati's Kevin Zeitler (projected five-year, \$58 million by Spotrac) is the best. But T.J. Lang (four-year, \$33.7 million), Ronald Leary (four years, \$36.4 million) and Larry Warford (five-year, \$31.1 million) are only viable candidates. It's much easier to get into a bidding war for a guard than a tackle.

2) Tackle and bait

I don't believe the Broncos will take the bait and set the left tackle market. Andrew Whitworth is the best available, and is 35. It explains why Denver has not closed the door on bringing back Russell Okung (who will have suitors like the New York Giants). Other names include Sebastian Vollmer and Kelvin Beachum. If patience becomes the approach, it frees the Broncos to be more prudent with a right tackle signing among a gaggle that boasts Rick Wagner and Riley Reiff.

3) Defense rests

Elway believes in his defense. With an improved run stopper, the group can be elite again. The Broncos must get better upfront to maximize the secondary and pass rush. Opponents avoided going after the No Fly Zone when they realized they could gash the Broncos on the ground. The big splash here would be Calais Campbell, a former Denver prep star. He is viewed as a leader and dominant player. It would be akin to bringing in a younger version of DeMarcus Ware in some ways. If not Campbell, the Broncos will look heavy into defensive tackles, with a reminder the draft is stocked on this side of the ball.

4) Romo built in a day

Rome wasn't built in a day. And the Tony Romo speculation, too, has taken weeks to reach its crescendo. Executives at the combine told me they expect the Broncos and Texans to be major players for Romo. Denver will reach out when Romo becomes a free agent. Will he take a base salary of \$10 million and change? That number mirrors Peyton Manning's last salary that inflated with incentives. Any Romo contract would involve incentives. If the Broncos reach out and determine Romo is determined to be in Denver then it's expected Elway will do what it takes to make it happen. The Broncos offer a contender and a quarterback friendly offense. Houston, like the Broncos, can argue they are one piece away, and obviously they are closer to Romo's home in Dallas.

The moves John Elway will make to go all in in 2017

By Woody Paige

Colorado Springs Gazette

March 5, 2017

Like James Bond in "Casino Royale," John Elway is going all in.

His teams - and they are undeniably Elway's Broncos - reached the Super Bowl in the 2013 and 2015 seasons.

In 2017, the next odd year, Elway will not tolerate another 9-7 record (and no postseason) or another one-and-done playoffs.

The past season was a complete mess, with Peyton Manning's retirement, Brock Osweiler's defection, the failure to attract a high-quality veteran quarterback, the loss of two primary defensive players to free agency, the offensive line deficiencies, critical injuries at running back and linebacker, the inadequacies of two young quarterbacks and a head coach who was "miserable."

Mistakes were made. Heads rolled.

In his 23rd season with the Broncos as player and executive, the 57-year-old Elway has a new offensive coordinator, a new defensive coordinator, 10 draft choices and \$42 million in spending money. He wants his eighth Super Bowl.

As someone who has been around John since he was a kid in 1983, I know that The Duke's such a fierce competitor he won't get into a poker game or an NFL game with scared cash, unexceptional young quarterbacks and a rookie left tackle.

Elway is not playing for 2018. No bluff.

First, Elway will go after Tony Romo, just as he recruited Manning to Denver. It is well to remember that Romo's representative, and trusted friend, is Tom Condon, the same agent Manning had.

Elway will lure Romo to the Broncos with the hope of finishing his career with one or two Super Bowls, a guaranteed offer of two seasons (and a third year team option) - with \$10 million-\$12 million annually (including a signing bonus, and incentives that could raise the salary to \$15 million), one of the premier defenses in football, an outstanding receiving corps, a new, improved offensive line, veteran offensive coaches and a proud franchise with a championship history, the best fans in the land and a great city.

Elway doesn't forget that Romo scored 48 points in his last start against the Broncos, or that he was 15-4 in 2013-14 before being injured (the first time). He will remind Romo that Elway himself, and Manning, both played in four Super Bowls in their late 30s (and won three).

The executive vice president of football operations will sign former Cowboys starting offensive guard Ronald Leary, who started 31 games in two seasons with Romo. He also will get free agent right tackle Ricky Wagner, late of the Ravens, and left tackle Kelvin Beachum (Jaguars) to play with '17 Pro Bowl center Matt Paradis (recovered from double hip surgery) and right guard Connor McGovern.

Romo will have Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders at wide receivers, a healthy C.J. Anderson in the backfield along with Devontae Booker, and a No. 1 draft pick who will be runner-slot receiver-returned Christian McCaffrey or tight end O.J. Howard.

On defense inside linebacker Brandon Marshall will return from injury to join starters Von Miller, Shane Ray, Aqib Talib, Chris Harris Jr., T.J. Ward, Darian Stewart, Derek Wolfe - and Bradley Roby, Shaq Barrett, Will Parks, Justin Simmons and Adam Gotsis and the newly signed Bobby Richardson. The Broncos will add free agents Brandon Williams (nose tackle, Ravens), Zach Brown (inside linebacker, Bills) and Calais Campbell (defensive end, Cardinals).

After signing Romo, the Broncos will trade Trevor Siemian - possibly to Buffalo, where ex-Broncos coach Rick Dennison is the offensive coordinator.

With their 11 selections in the draft, the Broncos can be expected to choose primarily players interviewed at the NFL combine the past week.

If the Broncos take McCaffrey in the first round, they'll draft a tight end in the second - Evan Engram (Ole Miss). If they go with Howard at 20, they'll grab Tennessee running back Alvin Kamara at 51.

Third round: (82), Isaac Asiata, guard-center, Utah; (101), Elijah Qualls, nose tackle, Washington.

Fourth round: (127), Marquez White, cornerback, Florida State.

Fifth round: (177) Zack Banner, tackle, USC.

Sixth round (203) Josh Dobbs, quarterback, Tennessee.

Seventh round (238) Harvey Langi, defensive end, BYU; (252) Ryan Switzer, wide receiver, North Carolina; (253), Jalen Robinette, wide receiver, Air Force Academy.

And that's John Elway's all-in "Casino Royale" Super Bowl team.

It takes non-Power 5 prospects to make this year's tight-end class an all-timer

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
March 5, 2017

What makes this year's tight-end class so deep is the abundant quality that is to be found not just from a host of Power Five products, but from a quintet of tight ends from Group of Five, FCS and Division II schools who so far have shown they belong with players like O.J. Howard and Jordan Leggett, who spent their college careers playing for national championships.

A quick look at five players whose emergence makes this the best tight end class in many years -- and perhaps all-time.

GERALD EVERETT, SOUTH ALABAMA

COMPETING ON EQUAL TERMS

The juxtaposition between Everett and SEC products Howard and Evan Engram of Mississippi during Senior Bowl week illuminated his potential. Everything that Howard and Engram could do, Everett did, as well. He matched the two step for step, catch for catch, block for block.

"I think it feels pretty good to be with such great tight ends, the elite caliber," Everett said. "Coming from a small school, we don't really get as much publicity as some of those SEC programs. But to be able to be at the same threshold and on the same pedestal as those guys is monumental for me."

Everett's blocking technique needs refinement -- and he knows that. But he demonstrated desire and effort when he focused on that area of his game; his description of himself as a "willing blocker" is accurate.

The keys to getting better?

"Just making sure I get my first step in the ground immediately as soon as the ball is snapped and keeping my hands tight," he said, "and making sure my hand placement is where it's supposed to be."

MICHAEL ROBERTS, TOLEDO

BIG HANDS, BIG-TIME

"Hauling in 16 touchdowns ain't easy to do," Roberts said of his a senior-season haul that saw him emerge as the most efficient red-zone target in college football.

But it helps when you have massive, 11.5-inch hands that are the largest of any offensive player at the Scouting Combine this year.

Roberts used those hands to become the nation's most efficient red-zone target last year, earning invitations to the East-West Shrine Game and the Senior Bowl. In those two weeks of all-star work, he showed how he can use his size and his hands to his advantage, roaring from off the radar to join a crowded, talented group of tight ends that could be a defining draft class at the position.

"I have had reporters put their hand out to mine and take a picture of it; I've seen some of those on the Internet. But I'm used to it now," Roberts said. "I don't think people understood how big my hands were until the East-West [Shrine] Game; ever since that surfaced, it's just kind of been a frenzy."

Still, it's not about the size of the hands. It's what you do with them.

"It's really about your mental concentration," Roberts said. "But don't get me wrong; they do help me wrap around the ball. If I touch it, it's not going anywhere."

ADAM SHAHEEN, ASHLAND

BULK THROUGH BURRITOS

It wasn't until the start of last season that the 6-foot-7, 278-pound Shaheen became aware that the NFL was not only a legitimate potential destination for him, but that he was already on the radar of teams' scouts.

"Just about every practice there was some kind of scout there," Shaheen recalled.

What they saw was one of the most versatile tight ends in this year's class. The Division II school's coaching staff lined him up inside, outside, in the slot -- "everywhere that they could put me, he said."

Shaheen arrived at Ashland as a 195-pounder. Early in his matriculation there, he was up to 225. Now, at 278 pounds, he's able to throw up 24 bench-press repetitions -- the most of any tight end -- while keeping his agility and fluidity.

How did he do it?

"A lot of Chipotle burritos. A lot of burritos," he said. "No, in all honesty, it was a lot of burritos. But it was a ton of consistency. ... I couldn't go in and doing one hard week of training and then lazy the next. It was a year and a half to two years of constant, 'Sorry, guys, I can't hang out. I gotta go eat.'"

ERIC SAUBERT, DRAKE

FROM A BARREN FIELD, A ROSE BLOOMS

Saubert was so lightly regarded coming out of high school that he was only recruited by Drake, Valparaiso and Division III schools -- all of which play non-scholarship football.

Of course, it was hard to get noticed when you play for a high school team that went a ghastly 1-26 over a three-year span. Saubert played at Hoffman Estates High School in Illinois, which won just once in his final three seasons there and usually fell by lopsided margins.

His time at Drake was considerably more successful. After redshirting in 2012 as a freshman, Saubert helped the Bulldogs to three winning seasons in the last four years, with a 25-19 record in that span.

After his third season, Saubert was invited to a junior pro day at Iowa State, just up I-35 from Drake's campus in Des Moines.

"That's when I knew I was going to take this experience seriously and pursue my dream," Saubert said.

JONNU SMITH, FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL

HARNESSING HIS ENERGY

Like Roberts and Everett, Smith capitalized off his work at the Senior Bowl.

"Coming in, there were a lot of questions about the level of talent I played at in Conference USA," Smith said. "Coming out and showing that I can play with the guys in the SEC, Big Ten, ACC and so forth -- I definitely showed that I can succeed."

He showed that -- but sometimes he got caught out of position and put himself at risk for penalties. In time, Smith should be able to keep his adrenaline in check and play within himself.

"Just being patient and not too aggressive," he said when asked what he learned about himself during Senior Bowl week. "[Being] overly aggressive can hurt you sometimes in pass protection. Sometimes you want to get a jump sometimes against the guy off the edge.

"Just be patient," Smith said he learned. "It'll come to you."

How Air Force prepared Jalen Robinette for a path to the NFL

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
March 5, 2017

Long before Jalen Robinette found himself on the cusp of realizing his NFL dreams, before he dazzled observers with the country's most efficient receiving production and before he took his first class at the Air Force Academy, he received the culture shock that most new cadets at the Academy get when they undergo basic training.

Through a six-week summer course that transitions young cadets into military life, Robinette was molded physically and mentally to prepare him for a college life that no other player at this year's Combine shares, and to prepare him for life after the Academy as an officer.

Basic cadet training begins with an introductory phase that focuses on instruction pertaining to military customs, codes, knowledge and daily conditioning. But it's the second phase at the rural training center of Jacks Valley that is most challenging. "Activities in Jacks Valley will push you to your physical limits," the Academy's admissions site warns. The conditioning, small-unit tactics and firearms training exercises are intense, and require a disciplined body and mind.

"That's kind of like one of those situations where we have to hit the ground running and that's exactly what I had to do," Robinette says. "It was definitely a huge culture shock, being yelled at, putting a uniform on every day — just everything you did, they watched you [and] observed you from head to toe."

With that kind of description, Robinette might as well have been training for a future in the NFL.

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Robinette couldn't see his NFL future until it was almost right in front of him. But others around him could.

Virginia Tech quarterback Jerod Evans could see it when they played together beginning with their time on Air Force's Prep School football team, before Evans tore his ACL and decided to transfer.

"I told him ever since I was at the prep school that he's going to make it to the NFL," Evans says. "And I didn't waver from it. He's really a freak of nature. I think once he gets that chance to show his ability, people will start salivating over him."

Robinette was more cautious about his chances. But as he prepared for his final season at the Academy, he knew the opportunity that lay at his feet.

"I feel like going into my senior year — in my junior year going into my senior year — I think I definitely, the opportunity was there," he says. "I definitely had to step up my game. I knew there was that gap coming from a triple-option offense to the pro style. I know people are going to see that gap when they

look at my and my situation, but I think I can definitely integrate well into a pro-style offense and onto an NFL team."

That transition might sound familiar to Broncos fans who recall how Demaryius Thomas became a top-flight receiver in the NFL after showing flashes in a run-heavy triple-option offense at Georgia Tech.

Like Thomas before him, and Calvin Johnson before him, Robinette's biggest challenge preparing for the jump to the NFL is learning the route tree that is the basis of receiving patterns at this level.

"I've definitely watched film on what [Thomas and Calvin Johnson] did," Robinette says. "They were kind of in the same situation, making big plays, didn't really run much of the NFL route tree, and I think their athleticism alone proved that despite what they went through with the triple option, they could definitely integrate and knock out the rest of the NFL tree and do great things in the league, which they did."

With that in mind, Robinette is focused on learning the route tree by repetition and following in Thomas' and Johnson's footsteps as best he can.

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Robinette joined the Academy with his future in mind. It wasn't about the NFL; it was about security, honor and duty. The ability to play Division-I football at the same time was just an added bonus.

The Academy prepared Robinette for much more than football, and it may have him more prepared than anyone for the wild changes that await him in the process that will deliver him onto an NFL roster.

"I think when we're thrown into the fire here at the Combine with all the media, the meetings, the drug tests, all the measurements and everything, it's definitely a test of how much patience you have," Robinette says, "and I think with all the training I went through, I definitely developed a way to handle that and stay calm under stressful situations."

And just in time for him to make the jump to the NFL, the Department of Defense updated its policy that previously required a 24-month active duty assignment after graduation. Now service members with the opportunity to play professional sports can serve out their duty in the reserve if their military branch approves their request.

A different path awaited Jalen Robinette, and now he has the preparation and flexibility to go after it without reservations.

A Day at the Combine: Eric Stutesville's running diary

By Aric DiLalla

DenverBroncos.com

March 5, 2017

The NFL Scouting Combine is busy for the 330 prospects who traveled to Indianapolis, but it may be even busier for the coaches of those teams looking to evaluate said prospects. Assistant Head Coach and Running Backs Coach Eric Stutesville took a moment away from the madness on Friday to walk DenverBroncos.com through his last 24 hours at the Combine. From meeting with players to assisting with the running back drills, Stutesville always had something to do. The Broncos won't select players to join their team for another couple months, but the work to identify potential for the next draft class has already begun.

Thursday, March 2, evening -- Stutesville's preparation for Friday's workout begins on Thursday evening.

The running back coaches who will assist with the drills gather and discuss set-up, timing and execution.

They get it figured out now — tomorrow, there will be no issues.

On a typical evening at the Combine, Stutesville may have an interview with a prospect. That's not the case on Thursday. He had already met with players on Tuesday and Wednesday night.

"You sit down and you meet with these guys," Stutesville says. "You have 15 minutes — it's kind of like speed dating. But it's a good thing where you get a chance to see them and see their personality and listen to them and ask them football questions and ask them other things."

Tonight, however, he's free to focus on the next day's work.

Friday, March 3, 7 a.m. -- Stutesville wakes up. It's a welcome change from the season when he'll have long been at UCHHealth Training Center. But he's got work to do, still. He spends the next two hours finishing up.

9:00 a.m. -- He heads to breakfast and has a meeting. This one lasts for an hour, and then he's got to get back to his room.

Stutesville packs his bag, as this is his last day in Indianapolis. He checks out of his room, but his trip isn't over. In a couple of hours, he'll be back in a comfortable setting: on the practice field.

11:02 a.m. -- Stutesville is at Lucas Oil Stadium early. The offensive linemen are done with their 40-yard dashes, but their on-field work will continue for another hour, at least. There's more linemen than running backs, and there are more drills. This session drags on, but Stutesville doesn't look concerned.

He stands, then sits, then talks with his fellow coaches.

“When we get here we make sure that we know what the time schedule from the offensive line group is, as far as getting ready to run the 40,” he says, “so that we can get started as soon as they get done with their drill work.”

1:10 p.m. -- The 40-yard dash begins for the running backs. They’ll sprint as hard as they can to put a good time on tape – but they’ll also stand and wait for another hour before the real workout begins.

Along the back of the end zone, everyone continues to stretch.

1:23 p.m. -- As the prospects go through the 40-yard dash on the opposite sideline, Studesville sits on a bench on the visitor’s sideline and watches. The drills are already set up. That happened at his meeting the previous night.

All that happens now is a quick check in with the quarterbacks who will hand the ball off and help with the route tree the backs will be expected to run.

“The only thing we’ll really do there is kind of talk to quarterbacks and tell them when the running backs are starting to get through that second group of 40s,” Studesville says. “We get them loosened up so they’re ready for the drills and to throw. And then as soon as they’re done, we’ve already organized in our meeting who’s going to talk through each drill, who’s going to do each drill, demonstrate the drills, and then we get out there.”

2:06 p.m. -- Studesville and the other coaches in attendance bring the 30-plus running backs together near the 30-yard line. Drills are explained. Expectations are communicated. When Studesville speaks, he’s concise.

“We’re going to work,” he says to Leonard Fournette, Christian McCaffrey, Dalvin Cook and other hopeful prospects in the crowd. Wasting time isn’t an option, and the players’ ability to follow instructions gives the coaches another piece of information in a packet that will help later determine their value in the draft.

“We do that because we don’t want to be here all day doing this,” Studesville says later. “That’s one reason. But the other part of it is we’re coming out to work. This is their first opportunity to demonstrate what kind of work ethic they have and how they’re going to approach this as a business.

“We want to instill that when you have all these running back coaches down here working with you, it’s acclimating them to what the expectations are going to be when they come to play for us. It’s going to be the same thing. We’re not walking around. We’re not waiting. There’s got to be some urgency in this. And that’s what we’re trying to start with that whole process here.”

2:10 p.m. -- Wisconsin’s Corey Clement takes a handoff from Colorado’s Sefo Liufau, hurdles three bags and quickly interprets a coach’s signal that instructs him which way to cut.

Studesville stands back and watches with the rest of the prospects as the first drill begins. He’s not there to coach up any of the players. There will be time for that later if the Broncos draft one of them.

For now, he makes sure that each player knows where he is supposed to line up, which route he is supposed to run and what to focus on as he completes each part of the circuit.

“I’m just down there just making sure we’re re-emphasizing little coaching points and the things we want, because we want everything to look the same,” Studesville says. “We want everyone to be lined up the same place, run the route the same way. That’s one of the things we look for. We’re looking for if they’re listening to details. Do you have to tell guys line up here, line up there. That’s all part of the evaluation process.”

2:16 p.m. -- The players huddle up again before another drill — this time, one that simulated a between-the-tackles run.

2:22 p.m. --- They move on to a toss play drill in which the players must show off their footwork around a trio of cones.

It’s one of the drills that teaches Studesville the most.

“I like the zig-zag cone drill,” he says. “I think that shows you their change of direction. Can they sink their center of gravity and move around cones?”

The first drill also catches his eye and shows him whether the players are in an awkward body position and how quickly they can react to information.

2:28 p.m. -- The running backs become pass catchers as they run five-yard outs.

2:34 p.m. -- A coach halts a drill. He reminds the backs to finish every drill strong — to pick up the pace and push themselves even harder. Message received.

2:41 p.m. -- The backs now leak out and run posts. Wheel routes are next. Then seam routes. Finally, the bubble.

McCaffrey excels. His footwork and hands are on a different level.

3:00 p.m. -- The final drill of the afternoon arrives. Studesville still stands with the players. In Denver, he may spend this time hyping up his players or encouraging a back who hasn’t had a great day. That isn’t his role in Indianapolis.

Instead, he’s still focused on the details — and on evaluation.

“We want this to be about the players,” he says. “This whole thing is set up for them. It’s not our time to jump in and fix. We want to see them.”

And in one final organized drill, he gets that chance. The backs flip around toward the quarterback and sprint about five yards back and forth between a pair of cones. On each of their three trips, they turn their hips and head and find a ball that’s fired at them from about 10 yards away. After the final ball, they turn upfield and sprint toward the end zone.

“I just think that makes you find the ball,” Studesville says. “There’s some little mechanics in there regarding what we want out of the drill. So they’ve got to think a little bit while they’re doing it and

they're going real fast. They get three balls and there's a lot going on right there. So I just think it kind of just gives you a chance to see a bunch of different things at one time."

3:07 p.m. -- The players gather. The past hour on the field has gone by fast, and the coaches and executives in the Lucas Oil suites have a wealth of new information to sift through.

Studesville helps break the group down, and he walks slowly toward the sideline where he stood an hour before.

He sits for a few minutes, grabs his briefcase and walks toward the exit.

Then he stops.

3:37 p.m. -- Studesville finally heads off the field. He's spent an extra half hour watching a dozen players who stayed behind for extra work.

It's a mix of guys. McCaffrey and Fournette are there. So are some players who won't be drafted.

There aren't any more running drills. Instead, it turns into an opportunity to show off their catching abilities. For McCaffrey, that means more chances to show how he stands above the rest. For Fournette, it's an opportunity to show he's more than capable. And for the lower-performing players, it's a way to make up for dropped passes or poor routes during the main workout.

During the extent of the hour-long session, each player had seven chances to catch passes. The sample size is small, and the results are meaningful. The extra work gives these players another chance to do what the coaches have yelled all day long: "Put it on tape!"

3:42 p.m. -- After a week of interviewing players, Studesville finds himself on the other end of the recorder.

He's asked what the drills could be missing — and if, maybe, the running backs should undergo some sort of pass-blocking evaluation?

"I don't think you can really do that," he says, "because we play the game in pads, so that's a hard thing to do. I know the offensive line does it, I just don't know if for backs it's going to be a true evaluation of what you would get.

"I think this is good to get a generic look at guys, but I place a lot of weight on what I see on game tape."

He's got a plane to catch, though, so he quickly strides toward the of Lucas Oil Stadium.

"Another Combine is done," he says.

Then he heads off toward more work, more evaluation and another season in Denver.

7:55 p.m. -- From Lucas Oil Stadium, Studesville heads straight to Gate C42 at Indianapolis International Airport. He boards Flight 689 and lands in Denver at 8:59 p.m. MT.

The real work is about to begin for Studesville.

“For me, I’ve watched what we call point-of-attack tape on these guys,” he says, “which are plays that have been pulled off and created, in essence, more like highlight tapes of guys. So I’ve seen just about all of them at this point in time, at least a little bit. Not studied them in detail, but I’ve seen what they can do a little bit.

“And then now what I’ll do, is I’ll go back and I’ll pull up anywhere from three to four games on every guy and watch games on these guys. I’ll pull up what I think are their best games where they had a lot of catches or a lot of carries or good competition. Then that’s where I’ll evaluate them and really start writing my evaluations and rankings of those guys.”

For the night, however, Studesville will head home to rest after four whirlwind days in Indianapolis.

It’s been quite the 24 hours.

Adam Gase, Marvin Lewis strongly endorse Broncos' HC Vance Joseph

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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As Vance Joseph inches closer to his first season as the head coach of the Denver Broncos, there may be no two people more equipped to discuss his readiness than Miami Dolphins head coach Adam Gase and Cincinnati Bengals head coach Marvin Lewis.

Joseph, who will be a first-time head coach, was hired in Denver after spending a year as Gase's defensive coordinator in Miami.

"I've known Vance for a long time," Gase said. "This was kind of my eighth year being around him. The relationship that we've had — we worked together in 2008 and then being around him as a defensive coordinator — I was not going to be shocked. I knew there was going to be some jobs open. He was going to be a guy that were going to want to talk to.

"I just kept thinking to myself, it would be really hard for a team to turn him down. Because when he gets in a room, his presence and the command he has around people — he'd be a tough guy to walk away from and be like, 'Nah, I don't want to hire him.'"

Ultimately, the Broncos found they could not turn Joseph away, as his potential as a leader of men was too great to ignore.

Lewis, who had Joseph on his staff as a defensive backs coach before Joseph left for Miami, also saw the characteristics in Joseph that make a successful head coach.

"He's got a great demeanor, a great knowledge of the game," Lewis said. "Broad, broad view. Great picture. He's excited for the opportunity."

On what Joseph does best, Gase didn't hesitate while speaking at the 2017 NFL Scouting Combine.

"Football I.Q." Gase said, "and the things that he does schematically are very good, as well."

Of course, having a strong skill set doesn't exclude a first-time head coach from the challenges that accompany a job in a coach's first year.

"I think each and every day is a new day," Lewis said. "And you know, there's things that happen particularly during the in-week season, that you're not prepared for. But you know what, you'll get through it. And then the next time around, you'll be better prepared and it'll be a much smoother transition through that particular, whatever that little hurdle is that comes up during the season.

Said Gase on his own mentality when he arrived in Miami last year: "I just felt like I was going to do exactly what I've always done, and that's just the brutal honesty part. You try to stick with that, just

communicating with guys. Just don't lie to players. That's the first thing I learned when I got in this profession."

"You tell them the truth, tell them straight. [Former Broncos coach John Fox] always told me don't B.S. them. Tell them exactly what you want and hit them between the eyes and they'll respect that. They might not like it but they'll get over it."

Both Lewis and Gase have found success as head coaches in the NFL, albeit for different lengths of times. If Joseph follows in their footsteps, the Broncos will be set for years to come.

And to hear Lewis and Gase talk about the Broncos' new head guy, there isn't much doubt that will happen.