

Why free-agent guard Kevin Zeitler will “break the bank,” where DeMarcus Ware may land, more

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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Joel Corry, a former sports agent who is now CBS Sports' salary-cap expert, spoke with The Denver Post about the Broncos' options in free agency and the possibility of getting quarterback Tony Romo, should the Cowboys decide to release or trade him. A bigger story on the conversation can be found here, but Corry offered up much more about players the Broncos could target and others they may see go this offseason:

On Romo:

“I expect Romo to be a Bronco. Houston may actually be his more favored destination because it's in the state of Texas and it's an easy transition. He wouldn't be uprooting his family in the same way as he would with Denver. But Denver, (recent) Super Bowl champions, just a quarterback away, it makes sense.”

On Trevor Siemian's status if Romo is signed:

“I'd keep him, just from the standpoint you don't have any money put in quarterbacks right now. It's not like his cap number of \$600,000 and some change is going to be really a hindrance to them cap-wise, and it's not like Trevor Siemian is some established quarterback who should have a huge problem if someone of Tony Romo's caliber came in when there's no guarantee he'd be the starter anyway if they don't bring a vet in.”

On Bengals guard Kevin Zeitler:

“He's breaking the bank. If you're getting Zeitler, you're in the (Kelechi) Osemele range (five years, \$58.5 million with Oakland in 2016). They have to be willing to pay top-of-the market guard prices.”

Other veteran QBs for the Broncos to consider:

“If he's going to have a legitimate shot to compete, I'd try to bring in a Brian Hoyer if you're not going to get Romo. There's no guarantee Jay Cutler would have gotten his job back when he got healthy if Hoyer hadn't gotten hurt. That'd be the guy who would be at the top of my list. I'm assuming you're not bringing in Tyrod Taylor if he gets cut because you're paying him a whole different level than you are a Brian Hoyer.”

On outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware:

“It's the injury history more than anything else because he's fairly productive still when he's on the field. He just can't stay on the field. So he's probably thinking the Cam Wake deal (two years, \$16.1 million with Miami) is indicative of his market, but Cam Wake had 11.5 sacks. So that's like apples to oranges to a degree.”

“I wouldn't be shocked if he went back to Dallas. They need a pass-rusher in the worst way. He's really more of a luxury for Denver than necessity because they drafted Shane Ray to replace him. That happened in Kansas City — Dee Ford took over for Tamba Hali. And also Shaquil Barrett's an improving

player. You need more pass-rush depth, but you don't necessarily need DeMarcus Ware, particularly if he's not willing to accept less of a role than he's had in the past."

On left tackle Russell Okung:

"I don't think he played well enough where he's going to generate a whole lot more interest than he did last year. It's just that offensive tackle salaries are going up and he's benefitting from the fact that you don't have a ton of great left tackles out there and he's mediocre. I always thought if they could get him in the \$7 million- to \$8 million-per-year range, that might be fair."

Broncos seeking a difference-maker TE, a bevy of athletic draft prospects make their case

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

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Evan Engram's swag bordered between confidence and arrogance. The Ole Miss tight end sat up in his chair and matter-of-factly opined he could be the offensive weapon to bring the Broncos back to championship contention.

NFL teams make the draft selections, but Engram called his own shot here at the NFL combine.

Engram, 6-foot-3, 234 pounds, believes he could be the second coming of Julius Thomas for the Broncos. And not the oft-injured version of Thomas. Engram means the speedy mismatch, red-zone star who had 24 touchdowns in the 2013 and 2014 seasons. Engram's 4.42-second 40-yard dash Saturday showed exactly what he meant.

"I've been watching him for a long time, and I've been talking with them about how they're trying to get back to having an athletic, down-the-field tight end," Engram said of Thomas and the Broncos. "I would love to play for that organization. Great coaching staff. They got an offense that needs some vertical threats, and I would love to be a part of that."

The Broncos have had a formal meeting with nearly every top tight end in a deep draft class that includes Engram, Alabama's O.J. Howard, Miami's David Njoku, Virginia Tech's Bucky Hodges, Clemson's Jordan Leggett and South Alabama's Gerald Everett.

Getting a third weapon on the inside — whether at slot receiver, tight end or both — is important for Denver as it looks to take pressure off wideouts Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders.

Howard and Njoku are probably first-round picks, but Engram, Hodges, Everett and Leggett could all go in the top three rounds. Each tight end has a different style.

So what makes each one special?

"My ability to be a three-down tight end," said Howard, who compares himself to Carolina Panthers tight end Greg Olsen. "Being able to stay in the game and run block, also being able to use my athletic ability in the passing game to separate from defenders. Being very versatile, I can go out wide. I can go in the slot."

Howard, 6-5, 251 pounds, has been considered the top tight end by many draft experts despite being underutilized at Alabama. He ran a 4.51 40 here, second best among tight ends. He may not be available when the Broncos pick at No. 20.

Njoku, 6-4, 246 pounds, is another athletic playmaker whom the Broncos are looking at in the first round. Njoku has more college production as a receiver than Howard, albeit with less blocking ability.

Njoku predicted he would break the standing long jump record for tight ends and surprise people with his vertical jump. He did both, leaping a 11 feet, 1 inch in the standing long jump, a record, before Hodges surpassed him with a 11-2. And Njoku had a 37 1/2-inch vertical jump, tied for third best among tight ends.

Hodges, 6-6, 257 pounds, may have had the best numbers at the combine of all the prospects. Along with his record-setting long jump, and had a 39-inch vertical jump and a 4.57-second 40-yard dash.

Broncos tight end coach Geep Chryst has raved about the talent at the top of this tight end class, but he's also impressed with the depth. Potential midround options Everett, Leggett, Ashland's Adam Shaheen and Michigan's Jake Butt are among the top tight ends.

Broncos general manager John Elway was optimistic about continued growth from young tight ends A.J. Derby and Jeff Heurman after last season. Veteran Virgil Green is productive as a blocker, but injuries sabotaged his 2016 season, and he's in the final year of his contract.

"We think that group is going to get better because of the youth that we have," Elway said.

Five Broncos tight ends, however, combined for just 53 catches, 591 yards and two touchdowns in 2016. That needs to get better in 2017.

Broncos' offensive line demands attention in free agency

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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Here are the moves the Denver Broncos should consider when free agency opens at 4 p.m. ET Thursday:

Finally fix the offensive line: Truth be told, the offensive line could easily be the top three priorities. There is no bigger reason the Broncos missed the playoffs last season than their play up front. It made them an unreliable team in the red zone, in pass protection and in the run game. Center Matt Paradis is coming off surgery on both hips, the Broncos already have an opening at left tackle and could have as many as four new starters up front even if Paradis returns to the lineup by training camp. Paradis is really the only "given" as the Broncos want to move away from being primarily a zone blocking scheme to an offense that uses zone concepts at times and man-on-man blocking in others. With as many as 10 draft picks at their disposal, the big guys at guard and tackle will get a long look both in free agency and in this draft class.

Improve the run defense: Defensive end Vance Walker and nose tackle Sylvester Williams are both slated to be unrestricted free agents. Williams will almost certainly move on, as the Broncos informed him last season they were not picking up the fifth-year option on his contract. The Broncos also had a candidate for Williams' job -- Earl Mitchell -- as their first visitor in free agency before he signed with the 49ers. Mitchell had been released by the Miami Dolphins. Derek Wolfe has missed some time with injuries in recent seasons as well. Opposing offenses were able to stay away from the Broncos' strengths -- pass rush and secondary play -- in the biggest moments last season because the Broncos couldn't consistently win enough at the point of attack in run defense.

Add depth at wide receiver/tight end: On one hand, the Broncos like having a dominant pair of wide receivers in Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders. On the other hand, opposing defenses knew they could double-cover both without much fear they would pay the price. The Broncos didn't have another wide receiver finish with more than 21 receptions. And Thomas and Sanders were the only Broncos with more than two touchdown receptions this season. They need impact somewhere else in the formation, either with a receiver comfortable working out of the slot or a tight end who can consistently get free down the field. It would help the Broncos' run game if they could force defenses to pull the extra defender away from the line of scrimmage. Because last season the Broncos didn't force defenses out of their comfort zones enough or force defenses to adjust.

LSU's Jamal Adams calls former Broncos safety Brian Dawkins 'a legend'

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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LSU safety Jamal Adams is one of the best players available in this year's NFL draft.

And while he almost certainly will be long gone off the draft board by the time the Denver Broncos pick at No. 20 overall, Adams had a brush with the team this weekend. Saturday, as he was going through the paces of his combine schedule with the rest of the defensive backs, Adams saw former Broncos safety Brian Dawkins sitting alone.

"I seen him talking to somebody, he was talking to a player and I was leaving, he was sitting by himself," Adams said. "And something just spoke, that's who I admire ... he's so passionate about the game and I had to go seek wisdom, see what he sees. The fact I went up to him and he already knew who I was, he's already seen some film on me, watched some games, I was blown away."

Dawkins, who played his final three seasons in the NFL with the Broncos, is part of the Philadelphia Eagles' contingent at the combine. Dawkins was hired as the team's football operations executive last season.

Dawkins was one of 15 finalists for the Pro Football Hall of Fame earlier this year. Adams and Ohio State's Malik Hooker are considered the top pure safeties on the draft board.

"[Saturday] I talked to a legend – Brian Dawkins – who I admire everything about him," Adams said Sunday. "I mean, that was the highlight of my week. Knowing that he already knew about it, saying how passionate I was, I play the game the right way. That was huge to hear that from a legend like him. ... [And] he's a better person off the field."

Best fits for top NFL free agents

By Matt Bowen

ESPN.com

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During NFL free agency, teams will target players who upgrade the roster, fill needs and create completion at key positions. A player's overall fit in a team's scheme is also an important part of the evaluation process. Today, as we near the start of free agency, let's look at the best fits for 14 intriguing free agents.

Players analyzed below include: WR Alshon Jeffery, LB Dont'a Hightower, RB Adrian Peterson, DT Brandon Williams, DE Calais Campbell, QB Mike Glennon, CB A.J. Bouye, TE Martellus Bennett, WR DeSean Jackson, NT Dontari Poe, WR Terrelle Pryor, CB Logan Ryan, G Kevin Zeitler and WR Pierre Garcon.

Alshon Jeffery, WR

Best fit: Philadelphia Eagles

There are availability concerns with Jeffery given his injury history and the suspension in 2016. However, in Doug Pederson's offense, Jeffery is an easy fit due to his size, catch radius and matchup ability. Think inside-breaking routes in the West Coast system with the ball thrown between the hash and the numbers. Use that frame to shield defenders and finish. In Philadelphia, the Eagles need a true No. 1 for Carson Wentz, a player who can move the sticks, win in the red zone and capitalize on 50/50 throws.

Dont'a Hightower, LB

Best fit: New England Patriots

When you watch Hightower's tape and study his versatility, there is no question he could produce in almost every NFL scheme. But I also look at how he is utilized in a variety of roles on Bill Belichick's defense and can't think of a better overall fit than returning to New England. Hightower's ability to stick the run, drop into coverage and get home to the quarterback is ideal for the Patriots' system. Yes, given that Hightower can play in multiple fronts, his price tag is going to climb on the open market. However, from a pure scheme and production standpoint, the Patriots would put him in the best position to play high-level football.

Adrian Peterson, RB

Best fit: Oakland Raiders

I expect a shallower market for Peterson, given his age (nearly 32), injury history and limitations as a receiving threat. But with a massive, nasty offensive front in Oakland and the passing game centered around Derek Carr, Peterson doesn't have to be forced into a 20-plus touches every week. He's a scheme fit for the Raiders' run game (both zone and power), and he could play a key role for a contender. This should be appealing to Peterson as he enters the latter half of his career.

Brandon Williams, DT

Best Fit: Baltimore Ravens

Williams is the top interior defensive lineman on the market due to his ability to win with strength and athleticism up front. He has great feet and burst off the ball, along with the power to clean up. That's going to drive up his value on the market, but Williams returning to Baltimore makes the most sense for everyone involved. The Ravens allowed just 3.72 yards per carry in 2016 (fifth in the NFL). That starts with Williams' impact at the nose tackle position. The smart move for Baltimore is to get Williams back in a system that caters to his skill set.

Calais Campbell, DE

Best fit: Indianapolis Colts

Campbell will be 31 years old at the start of the season, but the veteran is the type of versatile talent the Colts need to upgrade their defensive front. With his enormous frame (6-8, 300), Campbell can play as a 5-technique defensive end in the Colts' 3-4 front and also rush off the edge in sub-package situations. Plus, I believe an addition like Campbell would allow new Colts general manager Chris Ballard to start building a culture of toughness and accountability on the defensive side of the ball. With 8.5 sacks in 2016, Campbell has put himself in a position to grab a lot of attention in free agency.

Mike Glennon, QB

Best fit: Chicago Bears

Making a deal to bring in Patriots quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo is still the Bears' best option. But if we are talking scheme fit with the players about to hit the open market, then Glennon makes sense in Chicago. The Bears want to run a ball-control system with a quarterback who doesn't create adverse situations. Glennon has the arm strength and the decision-making ability (19 touchdown passes, nine interceptions as a starter in 2013) to take calculated risks in the passing game. The Bears need more consistent quarterback play under John Fox. And Glennon is their best available option at this time.

A.J. Bouye, CB

Best fit: New Orleans Saints

The Saints were in the mix for Josh Norman last offseason and there is still a major need in New Orleans to land a cornerback who can win in man coverage and make plays on the ball. Bouye's 2016 tape is legit, he finishes plays (16 passes defensed) and he would bring aggressive style to Dennis Allen's defense. You want to play man coverage versus Julio Jones, Mike Evans and Kelvin Benjamin in the NFC South? Then get a cornerback like Bouye who has enough length (6-foot, 191 pounds) and the physical ability to square these cats up at the line of scrimmage.

Martellus Bennett, TE

Best fit: Denver Broncos

With new offensive coordinator Mike McCoy, the tight end position becomes a matchup weapon once again in Denver. We saw that during McCoy's first run in Denver with Julius Thomas and again in San Diego with the combination of Antonio Gates and Hunter Henry. Bennett played banged up this past season in New England, but he still produced seven touchdowns and 55 grabs in the Patriots' offense. Bennett is excellent after the catch, and in McCoy's offense, he can create isolation matchups and work the middle of the field. That gives McCoy more freedom when drawing up his game plan and calling plays.

DeSean Jackson, WR

Best fit: Los Angeles Rams

Jackson averaged over 17 yards per catch in Washington last season, where now-Rams head coach Sean McVay was the offensive coordinator. The veteran WR can flip the field immediately with the speed to stretch the top of the secondary. Another factor for the Rams to consider is how Jackson's arrival would facilitate more growth in young quarterback Jared Goff. The Rams need an influx of talent at wide receiver and Jackson would give Goff a true weapon outside of the numbers to create field position and scoring opportunities. You want the young QB to develop? Give him targets who put stress on opposing defenses.

Dontari Poe, NT

Best fit: Oakland Raiders

Poe's massive frame (6-3, 346) and quick feet off the jump would upgrade a Raiders run defense that allowed an average of 117.6 rushing yards per game last season (23rd in the NFL). Drop the big boy in the middle of that base front and let him eat up space while using his athleticism to split gaps. That's how you win at the point of attack. Don't forget about his ability to push the pocket as an interior pass-rusher, either. Even though Poe's numbers were down in 2016, the ability of bookend rushers Khalil Mack and Bruce Irvin forces opposing quarterbacks to step up in the pocket. And that puts Poe right in the mix to clean up. With Poe, the Raiders would get bigger, stronger and tougher up front. That fits the culture of what Jack Del Rio is building in Oakland.

Terrelle Pryor, WR

Best fit: Cleveland Browns

Pryor should draw plenty of interest on the open market because of his extremely high ceiling and the matchup size (6-4, 223) he brings to the position. Plus, when you watch the tape, it's clear that Pryor is quickly developing from a route-running perspective. Pryor isn't just a raw talent anymore. The former quarterback can play, and his numbers from 2016, with shaky quarterback play in Cleveland, tell the story (77 receptions, 1,007 yards, four touchdowns). Would he be a fit in a lot of systems? No doubt. But staying in Cleveland makes sense. Hue Jackson's ability to teach and create opportunities for Pryor has the wide receiver on a path to becoming a true No. 1 in the league.

Logan Ryan, CB

Best fit: Tennessee Titans

Given the need in Tennessee for productive cornerbacks, and the role of the secondary in Dick LeBeau's defense, I can't think of a better match than Ryan landing with the Titans in free agency. LeBeau wants aggressive cornerbacks, guys who will challenge routes, drive on the ball and win with physicality. Ryan has 13 interceptions in four pro seasons, he is a technician in coverage and he's going to tackle. Yes, the Titans could pay up for Bouye or make a run at Stephon Gilmore, but the best fit? It has to be Ryan, given his tape, the coaching he received in New England and his overall ability to finish plays. That's an upgrade for the Titans in every area.

Kevin Zeitler, G

Best fit: Arizona Cardinals

The Cardinals' vertical passing attack took a step backward in 2016. Now, there are multiple reasons for why that occurred, but it starts up front with an offensive line that surrendered 41 sacks. That impacted Bruce Arians' game plan and the overall production from quarterback Carson Palmer. Adding Zeitler -- the best interior offensive lineman on the market -- allows the Cardinals to get younger and more athletic up front. Zeitler's ability to pull is a fit for the Cardinals' run game, and he strengthens an offensive line that has to keep its aging quarterback off the turf.

Pierre Garcon, WR

Best fit: Tennessee Titans

The Titans utilized more QB-designed runs and spread concepts this past season to counter their downhill, power run system. That's a positive given the natural ability quarterback Marcus Mariota brings to the position. But upgrading at wide receiver is still a must. In Garcon, the Titans would get clean route runner who's ultra-dependable (only one drop in 2016). Think short-to-intermediate routes and the ability to create separation at the break. Garcon is smooth, he's tough and he has had some real production at the position (79 receptions, 1,041 yards in 2016). Adding a veteran who is going to move the sticks and show up in critical game situations is key for Mariota and the Titans' passing attack.

Cowboys owner Jerry Jones wants to 'do right' by Tony Romo, but is he?

By Jarrett Bell
USA Today
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Jerry Jones was hosting the annual dinner Saturday night for his coaches, scouts and other Dallas Cowboys staff members working the NFL combine, and guess who showed up?

Bruce Allen.

Yes, the Washington president stopped by for a cameo visit, proving that the bitter NFC East rivalry also has some ... civility. Allen exchanged pleasantries with Jones and coach Jason Garrett, and surely they talked a little NFL shop — even if no shopping occurred.

It's safe to say no deal for Tony Romo was discussed. For all of the gossip, rumors and speculation that flowed amid league personnel, agents and media at the combine, the buzz about a three-team trade that would include sending Kirk Cousins from Washington to the San Francisco 49ers and Romo to the nation's capital was the most preposterous rumbling of the week.

There's no way the Cowboys would position Romo for some embarrassing revenge against them after they passed his starting job along to rookie Dak Prescott last year. Beyond that, Jones is adamant that if Romo, 36, is granted his release, he simply can't sign with Washington. In fact, a few hours before mingling with Allen, Jones sat on his luxury bus and revealed a basic understanding with Romo that would prevent the quarterback from suiting up in Washington's burgundy and gold.

"It is implied that we will work in the best way that we can in the mutual interest for Tony and the Dallas Cowboys," Jones told a small group of media that included USA TODAY Sports.

"We didn't have to say it, sign it. It's implied."

Is that even allowable under the NFL's labor deal? Apparently so, according to the owner of the league's most valuable franchise.

"If you know they're going to do right, that's very important," Jones said. "We've got to abide by every league rule. We can't have agreements without it being within the boundaries of the NFL. But when you've got a situation like we've got, we'll do the 'do-right' rule."

That's probably one of Jones' favorite situational references. In Romo's case, though, Dallas might have to take a hit for the 'do-right' rule to work both ways. Although Jones maintains that no final decision has been made on Romo's future — stunningly, he indicated there's still a chance that he might remain with the Cowboys — it seems that doing right by Romo could mean simply giving him his release. If that's the solution, it would be better for Romo if it happens ASAP so he can be positioned as an option — maybe for the Denver Broncos or Houston Texans — when the quarterback dominoes begin to fall with the start of the league's new year Thursday.

But Jones doesn't want to just give Romo away for nothing. Maybe the Cowboys can fetch a pick, probably in the latter half of the draft, if Romo restructures his contract into an incentive-laden pact that paves the way to a trade. At the moment, he counts \$24.7 million against the salary cap, a huge number that would surely inhibit a deal unless it is adjusted.

That's why Jones, who met recently with Romo and discussed the various scenarios, is in no rush to release his longtime star. He undoubtedly hopes Romo's market will produce at least one viable trade partner — provided it is a team, presumably a contender, that Romo approves of.

"We're in a situation right now where we need to see some things happen," Jones said. "We need to read some tea leaves. We don't need to be overtly doing something. We don't need it for the cap room. We just need to see some direction."

The Cowboys will take a huge cap hit for Romo, regardless of how this plays out. But listening to Jones, he seemed more conflicted about seeing the quarterback depart. He wistfully suggested a scenario where Romo could continue to back up Prescott — though I'd doubt that Romo, still a fiery competitor, would want to stick around unless he had a chance to compete for his former job. Yet part of Jones' alternative scenario is driven by his sentimentality, which was fueled a week earlier during a reunion of the Cowboys' three Super Bowl teams during his ownership.

When someone asked Jones about closure with Romo, he explained that their relationship transcends the sport and business arrangement.

Maybe so, but the friendship between owner and player sure makes things seem a bit sticky when trying to apply the "do-right" rule for all parties. That's just reality.

As Jones sees it, "Our relationship, it could help facilitate a better resolution than otherwise."

Especially if Romo doesn't wind up in Washington.

Myles Garrett and the Browns' Difficult Decision

By Albert Breer

MMQB

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“Hello, Cleveland!”

Those were the words of NFL Network analyst Mike Mayock as Texas A&M phenom Myles Garrett crossed the finish line of the 40-yard dash in a staggering 4.64 seconds on Sunday, putting a bow on the show that most scouts expected he'd put on here at Lucas Oil Stadium. And that run by Garrett, who weighs 272 pounds, only punctuated what everyone knew when we arrived in Indy: Garrett is the odds-on favorite to go first overall.

“He's good,” texted an AFC exec from the stands, “like everyone knows.”

“Lol. How about him?” texted one AFC area scout assigned to A&M. “Special.”

How special? If Cleveland takes Garrett first overall, he'll be the third edge rusher in the past 15 years to top the draft. Here's how he stacks up, athletically, against the other two.

Myles Garrett, Texas A&M, 2017

6-4, 272 lbs.; 40: 4.64; Vertical: 41"; Broad jump: 10-foot-8; Bench: 33 reps.

Jadeveon Clowney, South Carolina, 2014

6-5, 266 lbs., 40: 4.53; Vertical: 37.5"; Broad jump: 10-foot-4; Bench: 21 reps.

Mario Williams, N.C. State, 2006

6-7, 295 lbs.; 40: 4.73; Vertical: 40.5"; Broad jump: 10-foot-0; Bench: 35 reps.

In short, on Sunday at the NFL scouting combine, Garrett confirmed that he belongs with the freakiest of pro football's athletes. (Good luck to a historically strong defensive back group that takes the FieldTurf today in trying to top what we saw from Garrett.)

And Garrett didn't make the April 27 decision for the Browns any simpler. The reality is that the history of taking a pass-rusher first overall is just so-so (you can go back to Cleveland's Courtney Brown in 2000 for more evidence), and the Browns haven't had a real long-term answer at the most important position on the field since local folk hero Bernie Kosar led the team in the '80s.

Big call? Yeah, probably the biggest one in an offseason full of those for the Browns.

“(Work on the first pick) is gonna be extremely detailed,” Cleveland coach Hue Jackson said over his cell Saturday, between workouts and interviews. “We're slowly starting into the process. You work through

the Senior Bowl, you work through the combine, next thing that will come up will be private workouts, pro days, your top 30 visits. Then you have to take all that information and start into making decisions.

“We’re just starting into it, there’ll be so much more.”

* * *

Since the boss spent the weekend in Boston (where I live, and where the MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference was) and not here (where I am), I’m taking the reins for a week. And we’re going to get you more on how the quarterbacks here did, Jaylon Smith’s dropfoot, the strange case of Reuben Foster and the Patriots’ championship ride, with plenty of draft and free agency nuggets as well.

But we’ll start right there with Garrett, and Cleveland, and the global picture of what’s ahead for an embattled Browns franchise.

If the current regime gets this once proud franchise back to respectability, the moves GM Sashi Brown, Jackson and Co. make over the next six months figure to be a gigantic part of it. Cleveland has 11 picks in April’s draft, five in the first 65 selections, and 10 in the first five rounds. The Browns have more than \$100 million in cap space, and only one big free agent (Terrelle Pryor) to re-sign.

“It’s very exciting. But it’s pressure-packed too,” Jackson said. “You gotta get it right, because these are opportunities to take this organization in a whole new direction. So the thought of doing it the right way, doing it right all together, it’s on all of our minds. We want to get this right. We know this could catapult us into the future, and we have a lot of different ways to have success.”

Now, here’s the unsaid truth about the most interesting offseason confronting any team in the NFL: The analytically-driven approach that drove the accumulation of all those assets now must give way to something as simple and old as the league itself.

The Browns need to go get better players. The good news? As Jackson said, the Browns have plenty of different ways to get that done. In fact, I’m not sure there’s ever been a team that’s entered an offseason quote like this...

- Roster: The Browns currently list 74 players on their roster. More than half of them—40!—have either one accrued NFL season or none. There are just 10 players who have been in the league for more than four seasons.
- Cap space: No one in league history has had so much room. The Browns figure to enter the league year, depending on what happens with Pryor, with about \$102 million to spend. The entire salary cap in 2006: \$102 million. As recently as 2013, the cap was just \$123 million.
- Draft picks: two first-rounders (1, 12), two second-rounders (33, 52), one third-rounder (65), two fourth-rounders (108, 142), three fifth-rounders (145, 177, 183), one sixth-rounder (187). Business Insider ran the numbers—by the old Jimmy Johnson draft-value chart, the Browns picks add up to 4,145 points. The 49ers have the second most draft capital this year behind Cleveland. They’re at 2,656 points.

It's pretty simple. The Browns have to come out of this offseason with some valuable concrete as Jackson, Brown, vice president of player personnel Andrew Berry and chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta try and lay a championship foundation.

All eyes are where they always are in the NFL: Under center. So that was Question No. 1 for Jackson: Do you have to come out of this offseason with your long-term quarterback?

"We hope to," Jackson said. "We go into it looking to solve that. We all know until we have our quarterback, the guy that we want on our team (long-term), it's hard to move forward. Now, that said, we're not sure that guy is not on our team yet, I'm not trying to discount the guys that are on the team. You're just always looking to improve everywhere that you can. We're going to search high and low."

That search has already begun.

The background work on the veteran market is just about complete. "Every quarterback who has potential to be a free agent or someone that could be traded, I've watched everything they've done," Jackson says. He can't say the names, per league rules. But you can guess them. Jimmy Garoppolo. AJ McCarron. Mike Glennon. Tyrod Taylor. And probably a few more.

The work on the college kids is underway, but not near complete. Jackson came to the combine having watched five or six full games from each of the top half-dozen or so college signal-callers, and the team spent the last few days interviewing them and watching them work out.

"It's a very intriguing group," Jackson said. "You have a guy who's won a national championship, you have a guy who hasn't played a ton of football, you have guys who have played a ton of football, you have guys who can throw the ball all across the field, you have guys with football IQ through the roof. You have guys with a lot of different skill sets. You gotta make sure that you dig through it all.

"We just gotta spend more time with them. It's not just the tape. You've had a 15-minute conversation with most of them in a meeting room. That's not enough time."

By the time April rolls around, Jackson says he'll have watched every snap played by all the top draft-eligible quarterbacks, and give his input to his front-office colleagues. "I hope they lean on my expertise at the position as we get closer to making a decision about the position," he says. "But we're doing this thing collaboratively."

Like everyone else, Jackson was impressed with what he saw from Garrett on Sunday. And though neither he nor anyone else in Cleveland came out and said it, it sure looks like it's Garrett vs. the quarterbacks for the first overall pick, with guys like Alabama defensive linemen Jonathan Allen and Stanford pass rusher Solomon Thomas as dark horses.

And that's one of a few dozen decisions the Browns know they have to get right over the next two months. It's not overstating it to say the future of the team's current brass rides of it.

“Where we go, where we’re headed, this offseason is such a huge piece,” Jackson said. “We’re all thinking it, from top to the bottom, everyone’s focused on getting this right. ... It’ll determine what we all achieve in the future, whether we win, and win consistently. And the only way to do that, you have to have great players.”

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No Clarity in the QB Derby

After spending a week in Indianapolis, and four days last month in Mobile, I’d tell you there are five quarterbacks with a shot at going in the first round—Notre Dame’s DeShone Kizer, Texas Tech’s Pat Mahomes, North Carolina’s Mitchell Trubisky, Clemson’s Deshaun Watson, and Cal’s Davis Webb.

In what order, I don’t know. And I don’t think NFL teams have that figured out yet, either. But some themes to the class have emerged.

“First off, what stands out, I think there’s only one guy that’s ever taken a snap from under center,” Chiefs GM John Dorsey told me. “How about that one? It shows how we’re evolving into a spread-option era. Then, what you have to analyze is can they spit out a play in the huddle? If you look at the majority of these guys, everybody’s signaling everything in from the sideline.

“These are the types of things people are looking for as they sit and they talk to these players. Can they sit and regurgitate an offensive play? That’s hard to do, especially in (our) system, it’s really hard to do. But on the whole, they’re a more athletic group.

“Are there any finished products here? I don’t think so. So where are the warts, and are you willing to live with the warts? That’s what people are asking.”

I then asked Dorsey if any of the quarterbacks are ready to play. He smiled and said, “Me personally?” Then a long pause, another smile, and a “No.”

Again, that doesn’t mean there’s not plenty to like with the group, and more to dissect. So I asked one AFC personnel director to break down for me what he saw from the quarterbacks. He missed Webb, but got the other four. Here are his notes, with the caveat he wanted to emphasize—these guys are throwing different routes to receivers they don’t know ...

- Kizer: Big, strong, good arm and velocity. Smooth release. Inconsistent feet, timing and accuracy. Had the same misses on multiple reps.
- Mahomes: Tight release, but thought he would be more consistent and better throwing deep.
- Trubisky: Athletic, good arm strength. Some inconsistency in accuracy and timing and deep ball.
- Watson: Very consistent, athletic. Easy motion. Easy ball to catch.

A winner for the week? It was Watson. He blew teams away in interviews to the point where I know a couple clubs that weren't wild about him were anxious to go back and take a second look at the tape to see if they missed on their evaluation. And his field work was very good.

I wrote last month that Trubisky was the leader to be the first quarterback taken, and I still think that's probably the likelihood. But Watson has gained some ground.

* * *

What's Happening in Washington?

A year ago, it seemed like the old Redskins circus had finally closed up shop. Jay Gruden grew into a very good head coach with a rock-solid staff behind him, and Washington had a potential long-term answer at quarterback and arguably the best talent-evaluator of the past decade as their GM. The team was coming off a playoff berth. There was no drama.

Not anymore. It's been a strange offseason already in Washington. Here's a quick synopsis.

- Staff: Gruden lost offensive coordinator Sean McVay to the Rams and the Skins fired defensive coordinator Joe Barry. The team wound up elevating quarterbacks coach Matt Cavanaugh and linebackers coach Greg Manusky to replace them.
- Quarterback: Kirk Cousins has been franchised again, and there's legitimate uncertainty about his immediate future.
- Scot McCloughan: The third-year GM was left home from Indy amid a twister of speculation. The given reason: his 100-year-old grandmother died Feb. 6. His past demons were raised on D.C. radio by ex-Redskins tight end Chris Cooley. Given that no one in football is better/more passionate about scouting the draft than McCloughan, his absence was glaring, and the future here looks murkier than it did.
- Free agents: The offense could look significantly different next year with receivers Pierre Garcon and DeSean Jackson expected to draw robust interest.

One source described the vibe in DC succinctly: "Just a bunch of strange s---."

There are lots of dominoes that have to fall soon. As for the big one, I don't think the Skins are afraid to lose Cousins and the reason why is Colt McCoy. Is the 30-year-old McCoy a 10-year answer for Washington at the position? No. But he can be what Cousins can't be at this point, and that's a bridge quarterback, which is why the question isn't Cousins vs. McCoy in a vacuum.

It's the brass buying Cousins and hitching its job security to his successes and failures vs. renting McCoy while looking for a younger upgrade at the position.

It'd be risky as hell, to be sure, and I wouldn't call it likely. But the Redskins do believe they can win in the short term with McCoy, and there's a feeling that it'd be better to just resolve the Cousins situation

now—whether it's giving him a new deal or trading him—and not setting up to be in this position again in spring 2018.

Of course, the brass and the team could look a lot different by then. Stay tuned.

* * *

Jaylon Smith's Drop Foot

Cowboys owner Jerry Jones told Dallas reporters on Saturday that 2016 second-round pick Jaylon Smith would be able to play in the fall with the help of an AFO (ankle/foot orthoses) brace.

Now, the whole truth, as I understand it: The team very much views any and everything it gets from Smith in 2017 as a bonus. Nerve damage and a resulting case of drop foot knocked Smith, previously a potential Top 5 pick, out of the first-round all together last year. The nerve has started firing again, and he's gained foot activation, but he's nowhere close to full strength, and may never get there.

Can he be effective playing with the brace? It sounds harsh, but it's unlikely.

The brace is designed to allow the most basic of things—your foot to clear the ground when you take a step forward. It's designed to stabilize, but it doesn't recreate the energy you normally generate when you push off your foot. And that's why Dr. Thomas Gill, the former Patriots team doc who saw ex-New England RB Robert Edwards go through this almost two decades ago, is skeptical on Smith.

"A hinged AFO will allow you to have your foot flex up, but not have it slap down," Gill said over the weekend. "So basically, you wear a brace so when you're running or walking, your foot can have clearance when you swing your leg forward. But it's not built for speed.

"Robert Edwards, he played with it for a while but lasted less than a season doing that. And he was a running back. You have to be a freakish athlete where you can afford to lose 20 or 25 percent of your speed, at least, and 45 percent of your power, and still be able to compete in the NFL."

And playing with the ailment isn't without risk, either.

"The risk is that you're gonna be more prone to injury. Your foot's gonna get caught in an awkward position," Gill continued. "So if you're in a pile-up, you know the classic high ankle sprain mechanism where the guy falls on the back of your leg? That leg's gonna be a lot more prone to getting caught in an awkward position, because he can't point his toe."

Now, there's a chance the nerve improves over time and Smith gets back to full speed down the line. But Dallas isn't counting on anything like that in the short term.

* * *

Quotes of the Week

|

“You know, Willie, one of my best memories was right here on this field, when you made that short yardage stop there against the Colts. And then the next year, we opened with them and you made the sack that took Vanderjagt out of field-goal range, and I think that’s where Vrabel got them on the fake timeout too—and then they changed the rule on that. But anyway, you got the Colts back to back, two years in a row, here and in Foxborough.”

—Patriots coach Bill Belichick, in the booth with NFL Network’s Rich Eisen and Mike Mayock, to his old linebacker Willie McGinest.

This Belichick has always been the most entertaining Belichick—and we get to see it every so often. In with Mayock and talking to McGinest, the seven-time champion was jovial, flashed his photographic memory (except that the first one was actually at the old RCA Dome, not Lucas Oil Stadium) in the details, and even got a shot in at his old friends at the competition committee and with the Colts.

II

“Dominate here and not make any more crazy videos.”

—Garrett, when he was asked what he planned to do to prove he was worth the first overall pick.

On that first part ... Check. We’ll see on his second goal, which is a reference to the video in which he asked his hometown Cowboys to acquire him.

III

“He has elite versatility. The guy could’ve started for us at receiver. He’s one of those guys who can do so many things, and in a league that—especially with what New England and all of them do—really puts a premium on versatility. I mean, there’s nobody out there better. And he’s still getting better and better all the time. He missed his entire first year, so there were some things development-wise. He was just really getting better quickly. And he still has a long ways to go. ... Yeah, he has special ability, but his versatility sets him apart. He can get you the tough yard in the I, he can play on third down, you can put him out at receiver. He threw a touchdown pass this year. He can literally do just about anything.”

—Oklahoma offensive coordinator Lincoln Riley on Joe Mixon.

This is a leftover from last week’s Game Plan lead on Mixon, and explains why Mixon will be drafted and maybe before Day 2 is done. Ezekiel Elliott’s value last year was that he was built like a big back but had little back skills. Mixon isn’t Elliott, but he is that way too. His Pro Day is Wednesday. He told me he hopes to post a 4.39 in the 40-yard dash.

IV

“When you interview these guys, there’s a little bit of a BS radar that goes up. And if you detect it, I think everyone has a pigeonhole. Just make sure your pigeonhole isn’t full of crap.”

—Falcons GM Thomas Dimitroff to Mike Florio on PFT Live.

Amen. I think.

V

“He provided an example of how a pro should approach his craft and established his place in NFL history as one of the best at his position.”

—Jets GM Mike Maccagnan in a team-issued statement announce the ouster of cornerback Darrelle Revis.

This used to be true about Revis, without question. And Maccagnan is one of the nicest, most well-intentioned people in the NFL, so I understand not wanting to light a guy up as he’s pulling out of the driveway. But it feels like this is sort of the opposite of what Revis was in 2016, and what he’ll need to prove to other teams as he pursues his next football job.

* * *

Stat of the Week

These are the 22 quarterbacks who are on deals for the 2017 season that average \$16 million per or more.

- \$22 million-plus: Andrew Luck (\$24.6M), Carson Palmer (\$24.4M), Drew Brees (\$24.3M), Kirk Cousins (\$23.94M), Joe Flacco (\$22.1M), Aaron Rodgers (\$22.0M).
- \$19 million to \$21.9 million: Russell Wilson (\$21.9M), Ben Roethlisberger (\$21.8M), Eli Manning (\$21.0M), Philip Rivers (\$20.8M), Cam Newton (\$20.8M), Matt Ryan (\$20.8M), Tom Brady (\$20.5M), Ryan Tannehill (\$19.3M).
- \$16 million to \$18.9 million: Jay Cutler (\$18.1M), Tyrod Taylor (\$18.0M), Tony Romo (\$18.0M), Brock Osweiler (\$18.0M), Matthew Stafford (\$17.7M), Sam Bradford (\$17.5M), Alex Smith (\$17.0M), Andy Dalton (\$16.0M)

Now, Cutler is coming off the list, and Taylor and Romo might, too, though they could also just wind up back on soon thereafter. Before too long, Derek Carr—eligible for a second contract this offseason—will be joining the list too, and Jameis Winston and Marcus Mariota will be in the not-so-distant future as well. Jimmy Garoppolo is ticketed to land on it too, if he’s traded.

You get the picture. Here’s the point: Quarterbacks aren’t paid like everyone else.

So when this year’s sticker-shock quarterback, Tampa Bay’s Mike Glennon, gets more than \$12 million per this week, and gets a lot closer to what Osweiler got last year than most think, don’t react by letting your jaw hit the floor.

Say Glennon goes to Chicago and the Bears draft a rookie with the third overall pick (last year’s third pick, Joey Bosa, makes \$6.47 million per year). They’re probably then allotting a little more than \$20

million to the position—or less than they did last year at quarterback with Cutler and Brian Hoyer on the roster.

This is just the price of doing business at the most important position in sports.

* * *

10 Things I Think I Think

1. I think the idea of Tony Romo going to the Texans makes a lot of sense. Peter mentioned a couple weeks back that, from a personal standpoint, Houston makes the most sense for the Cowboys quarterback for a number of reasons. And my sense is that the Houston staff would view Romo as a very good fit if he became available. Remember, Romo played in an offense that's a basically a first cousin of Bill O'Brien's scheme in his first four NFL season under Bill Parcells. The question, in my mind, is how far the Texans are willing to go to make it happen. Trading for him would be easier than most think. Romo is due \$14 million for 2017—a below average rate for a starting quarterback—and his base salaries of \$19.5 million and \$20.5 million would in essence serve as team options for 2018 and '19, with no guaranteed money left in Romo's deal. The Texans do, at least as of right now, have sufficient cap space to take on the existing contract. The question is whether they'll want to, which would probably be a tougher call for them than parting with a middling draft pick. Burgeoning star corner A.J. Bouye is likely to get upwards of \$14 million per on the open market, and bringing in Romo may mean saying goodbye to Bouye, and a few other free agents. My feeling is that, if the season started right now, Tom Savage would be under center for the Texans. And Houston feels good about him. But Romo would be an upgrade.

2. I think it also makes sense for the Bills to pick up Tyrod Taylor's contract option. You'd be doing your new offensive coordinator a favor—Rick Dennison coached Taylor in Baltimore in 2014, and the Ravens offensive staff liked him enough to try to import him to Denver after Gary Kubiak took the Broncos job. You'd be sending a positive message to the locker room. But most of all, you'd buy yourself time of finding a quarterback of the future. Worst thing you can do is pigeonhole yourself into a single offseason to find a long-term answer at the position. That's how Christian Ponder goes 12th overall to the Vikings in 2011 and Brock Osweiler gets \$18 million per year in Houston. Having Taylor would give the Bills, at the very least, a bridge to the next franchise quarterback. So if they like, say, Watson at 10th overall, they can take him and they don't have to play him right away. If they don't like any of the quarterbacks or the one they like doesn't get to them, they can wait till next year. And the terms—it's really a three-year, \$54.1 million deal—are middling for a starting quarterback in 2017. To me, it just makes sense to stabilize the most important position on the field, even if you aren't answering who your quarterback might be in 2022.

3. I think the Jets are doing what Mike Maccagnan and Todd Bowles probably should've done two years ago—swallowing hard and readying for a youth movement. The ouster of Brandon Marshall, Darrelle Revis and Nick Mangold et al signals a purge of the core of the team's shot at a competitive rebuild, a term used internally to describe the effort to gut the roster from bottom up without bottoming out. There are just four draft picks from the John Idzik Era under contract for 2017 (Sheldon Richardson,

Brian Winters, Quincy Enunwa, Calvin Pryor). And Mo Wilkerson is the only one left from Mike Tannenbaum's time in green. In other words, the Jets are now virtually bereft of homegrown players in their prime earning years. That explains why, no matter how much lipstick they smeared on the 2015 season, this rough path always was bound to come.

4. I think the Seahawks were paying attention when Chiefs safety Eric Berry got paid. Earl Thomas turns 28 in May and has two years left on the extension he did in 2014. Kam Chancellor turns 29 in April and is going into a contract year. Those two have been central to the Seahawks' defensive identity—Chancellor as a hybrid thumper and Thomas as silly-rangy centerfielder—over the last half-decade. They were rewarded for it with deals worth \$17 million per year combined. Fair to guess, they'll be more expensive to do third deals and, because of age, are naturally riskier propositions.

5. I think, on the flip side, LSU safety Jamal Adams and Ohio State safety Malik Hooker were smiling ear-to-ear at the mention of Berry's windfall. Asked simply if he saw the news, Adams responded to me, "I did. I did. And loved it. Setting the bar!" If both Hookers and Adams go inside the Top 10, it'll be the first time in 11 years two safeties have gone that high in the same draft, which is only more evidence of the rising importance of the position, something Adams says he sees simply in how he was deployed in college, and the way he sees NFL safeties used. "You have to be able to do everything on the back end," Adams said. "In the NFL, it's changed. You have to have the safety that can come down inside the box or outside the box, covering the slot, covering the tight end. Blitzing. You have to be that leader, be that communicator. I think that's why the value of the safeties went up. And there's no choice. The game's changed. Safeties have to as well." We'll have more on the evolution of the position in a future column.

6. I think I'll repeat that offensive linemen figure to get paid on the open market this week—and the final effect could be that guards wind up paid like tackles. Why? The offensive line franchise tag number (\$14.271 million) isn't broken down by position, which means it's based on what left tackles make. That, in turn, makes it tough to tag even a great guard. And so premier guards can make it to the market. As of now, there are 14 linemen making eight figures per. Only three of them are guards. Add to all of this that the coming draft class of offensive linemen is weak, and Kevin Zeitler, Ron Leary and Larry Warford could join the group, or at least settle on the fringes of it.

7. I think the flip side is that the market at both corner and receiver—two spots where there's relative strength (Alshon Jeffrey, Brandon Marshall, Kenny Stills, DeSean Jackson at receiver; Bouye, Stephon Gilmore, Dre Kirkpatrick)—could be adversely affected by the historic quality of the draft class at corner and strong depth of the class at receiver. It's not out of the question that Jeffrey becomes the second or third highest paid receiver in league history, and Bouye and Gilmore easily outdistance the deal Janoris Jenkins got last year. But there'll be a number of would-be suitors that balk at the prices and sit tight until April, which is one reason why you shouldn't panic if your team is strangely quiet in filling those needs this week.

8. I think the most common comp that Washington receiver John Ross got from NFL folks last fall was DeSean Jackson, something that makes the burgeoning relationship the two have built (as chronicled by

our Emily Kaplan) that much more interesting. Part of that comp is based on how fast Ross looked as a collegian. Safe to say, we got confirmation Saturday that he actually is that fast.

9. I think this is the Dak Prescott Effect on the 2017 draft—when teams scramble back to see what they missed on the Cowboys' rising star, the place most have landed is in the area of his leadership and mind for the game. And in that respect, score one for Watson, for the reason we mentioned in the quarterback section above: He crushed his interviews. Teams privately raved about his football intelligence and personality. Prescott's more vocal, and a little more of a pied piper than Watson, but the effect those two have on their teammates, and the impression they leave on people just meeting them, isn't much different.

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

a. Don't take this as any indication of my political leanings: I just never thought the President of the United States would go with a wire-tapping accusation and reality-TV review in consecutive tweets.

b. The Lakers drama, with the Buss family in full implosion, is probably juicier than any of the organizational dysfunction I've seen in my 12 years covering the NFL. And we've had some doozies.

c. Watching the end of Duke/Carolina at an Indy bar the other night was a good reminder that it's time to start paying attention to college hoops again.

d. I always eat too much steak in Indy, so it was good to find an awesome new Mexican place downtown Saturday night. It's called Nada, and the Modelos flow like wine there.

e. Thank you to everyone who showed so much concern over my having to fight through sickness at the combine. It's not for me to say, but many noted my courage over these past six days. #warrior

f. Coffeenerdness: I can't remember ever only drinking Starbucks for an entire work trip, but I only drank Starbucks on this trip. I'm excited to get home.

g. Beernerdness: I just want to make this clear ... Beirut (or beer pong for the less informed) is meant to be played with Natural Light.

h. I can't remember there ever being less buzz around Red Sox spring training than there has been this year in Boston—and that's after the team acquired a new ace in Chris Sale. And I'm wondering if it's like that for baseball all over the country now.

i. Of course, in the town I live in and the one I grew up in, it's a lot easier to find kids playing lacrosse in the spring than it is to find them playing baseball.

j. And I know Peter's column is probably not the place to be taking shots at baseball, so that's the end of that.

2017 NFL free agency: Browns primed to land Tyrod Taylor, Bears eye Glennon

By Jason La Canfora

CBSSports.com

March 6, 2017

The quarterback shuffle in the NFL is about to begin and two of the first dominoes to fall should be Mike Glennon and Tyrod Taylor. A Tony Romo or Jimmy Garoppolo trade could take some time to develop, while the Redskins now have until July 15 to get a long-term deal done with Kirk Cousins.

The Bills do not plan to retain Taylor at his current contract, according to sources, as they continue to meet with agents for free agent quarterbacks and explore other options. And while the Bills have proposals at a lesser salary on the table, no one I've talked to here at the combine -- general manager, cap guy or agent -- can figure any reason why Taylor should accept anything from the Bills at this point. Especially with him being coveted as a free agent.

League sources said the Browns have significant interest in Taylor as a free agent. Taylor has strong ties to some on the Browns staff already and if/when he hits the open market I would be shocked if the Browns don't make a real push for him. Many in the league believe that's where he will end up -- he's young and athletic and protects the football and has upside. That would allow the Browns to take the two best players available with their two first-round picks -- beginning with Myles Garrett first overall. The Browns also continue to try to push to retain pending free agent receiver Terrelle Pryor to have some weapons for the new QB.

As for Glennon, he is clearly poised at the top of a very shallow starting quarterback free agent market and several GMs around the league believe Chicago has the strongest current interest in him and will emerge as the front-runner to land him coming out of the combine. The Bears love Jimmy Garoppolo but that requires parting with multiple significant assets and they seem convinced Glennon can do the job. I'd anticipate the money being in the Ryan Fitzpatrick range from a year ago - \$12 million per season -- with the chance to earn significantly more via production and incentives.

NFL Insider notes: Seven teams ready to spend big in NFL free agency

By Jason La Canfora

CBSSports.com

March 6, 2017

NFL free agency is often fool's gold with the worst teams chasing what's left of the "best" players and vastly overpaying in some instances. When I spoke to agents about which teams were showing interest in their pending free agents and seemed primed to spend the most, the teams I almost universally heard were the Browns and 49ers.

Makes sense -- as they have the two worst rosters in the NFL and have the most cap space to burn and need to send some sort of hopeful message to the fans as they hold the top two picks in the draft for a reason. Both franchises are actively exploring quarterback options and also need linebackers and pass rushers and corners and I could do on and on. Expect them to set the market at multiple positions, knowing they have to sweeten the pot to get players to come to teams that have struggled this much and have endured constant turnover of the roster and front office.

The Browns would love to land top safety Tony Jefferson and others, while I continue to hear a persistent buzz about the 49ers and receiver Alshon Jeffery. Among others.

The Bears won't stop at Mike Glennon should they indeed land him as many expect. They are going hard for cornerbacks and could land Buffalo's Stephon Gilmore, who sources say is seeking to at least match Janoris Jenkins' deal with the Giants a year ago that pays near \$13M a year with \$29M guaranteed. Gilmore is likely to be the highest-paid corner on this market, with A.J. Bouye and Logan Ryan the next guys up. They'll do well also.

Agents have mentioned the Lions and Jags as potential big spenders as well, and Jacksonville seems intent on upgrading its offensive line. Bengals guard Kevin Zeitler is the top target and he could command \$12M a year. He's a great player who is young and clean. And the Jets will be seeking best-of-breed players as well, but if they can't get their primary guy I doubt they chase around lesser players at the same position group. Guys like Tony Jefferson -- who played for Todd Bowles in Arizona -- and Rams speedster RB/returner Bennie Cunningham and Ravens fullback Kyle Juszczyk all make sense for them.

As for Jefferson, I've been saying for weeks he is going to be one of the real winners in this free agent class and break the bank, and here at the combine teams didn't scoff at him reaching \$10M per year. In fact, at this point, anything else would surprise me. The Cardinals won't be able to keep pace with that spending, but could Baltimore? Juszczyk is going to do very well also, as teams see him as not just a fullback but a latter-day Mike Alstott type who can also catch over 50 balls a season. His price point seems destined to shatter what the Ravens would likely want to pay. It also looks bleak for the Ravens to keep defensive tackle Brandon Williams and right tackle Ricky Wagner right now as well.

And the Buccaneers are inclined to keep pushing to get in the postseason. Cardinals defensive lineman Calais Campbell and Redskins receiver DeSean Jackson are just two of the players they are interested in.

More NFL news and notes

Top free agents will be gone fast

Despite the NFL Combine being moved back a week, and thus now bumping right into the start of free agency, agents and teams said they were leaving town without deals in tow. Plenty of talking and plenty of setting parameters, but the consensus was that by noon Tuesday the offers will be flying and that by midnight on Wednesday the first wave of free agency will essentially be over, with agreements in place for the top free agents. One suggestion for the future -- allow players to make free-agent visits anywhere they like right after the combine. Had a few execs mention that might help the process as well moving forward.

Raiders to Vegas not dead ... yet

While the Raiders chances of getting a vote to move to Las Vegas appear bleak as they have no stadium deal, league sources say Cowboys owner Jerry Jones hasn't given up hope. He is very much trying to help Mark Davis fulfill that dream and is trying to help broker something in Vegas in the aftermath of Sheldon Adelson pulling out.

Gruden's new deal

The Redskins extension with Jay Gruden came together very quickly. A fairly impromptu meeting between team president Bruce Allen and Gruden's agent, Bob LaMonte, occurred in Indy, as it is wont to do, and within a short period of time a two-year extension was hatched. Gruden had two years remaining on his already very lucrative rookie head coach deal. Given all the turmoil and tumult in the Redskins front office right now -- with some wondering if Scot McCloughan will still be the GM after the draft -- I'm not surprised they did something with their coach to signify continuity, in so much as there is ever continuity in Washington.

Possible first-rounder Tim Williams admits to multiple failed drug tests at Alabama

By Eric Edholm

Yahoo.com

March 6, 2017

NFL teams have been well aware for months about what Alabama pass rusher Tim Williams admitted to the media on Saturday: that he failed multiple drug tests while he was at Tuscaloosa.

Williams said he failed “a few” tests in his four years at Alabama but would not confirm what drug the positive tests were for or exactly how many he failed.

Many teams Shutdown Corner has spoken with throughout the season have said they do not fear Williams becoming another Randy Gregory, who has struggled to stay sober in the NFL with the Dallas Cowboys. But Williams’ character must be fully vetted after the the drug concerns, along with a gun charge from last September.

There was marijuana found in Williams’ car as well.

Despite the multiple failed tests, Williams was never suspended. But he was forced to sit out the first half of the Kentucky game last season for the misdemeanor gun charge.

“[I’m a] young player making decisions that I grew from,” Williams said. “That’s what life is about — being a man on and off the field, owning up to your mistakes. Everyone makes them. I’m not here dancing around and joking.

“I know I’m here with something to prove. I’m obviously behind the 8-ball, so I’m here to prove not only to myself but to every organization that if they get me, they’re going to get the best player here.”

Williams had his role increased this past season from strictly as a pass rusher in 2015 to a more well-rounded player on a deep Bama defense in 2016. His snaps nearly tripled, and though Williams’ sacks fell from 10.5 in a third-down role to nine this past season his overall play was strong by the end of the season in which Bama was runner-up in the national title game, losing to Clemson.

NFL teams are fascinated by Williams’ explosion off the line and his sheer upside, and some believe he’s destined to be a double-digit sack performer. But they also want questions about his dependability and whether he could find trouble off the field.

“I’m going in and being completely honest. This is a billion-dollar industry. They’ve got all their homework and they know everything about you,” Williams said. “You can’t go in there and just be dishonest, because a first impression is a last impression.

“So far they’ve respected me for that.”

When asked what Bama head coach Nick Saban might say about Williams if an NFL team called to vouch for him, Williams said: “That I was never dishonest with him.”

Mason's Mock Draft 2.0: Lock Myles Garrett in at the top

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
March 6, 2017

Massive changes will loom after the start of the new league year and the free-agency frenzy it spawns, but for now, let's see how the 2017 NFL Draft might look:

1. CLEVELAND BROWNS

DE/OLB Myles Garrett, Texas A&M: Cleveland needs a quarterback, but the value could be better a bit later. Why not get an edge rusher who could be the best at that particular skill since Von Miller?

MOCK 1.0: Same

2. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

QB Mitchell Trubisky, North Carolina: This could change if the 49ers find a long-term quarterback option via a trade. But if they're only left with free agency, they're likely limited to stopgaps -- which would actually be fine if they draft Trubisky, who needs time to watch and grow.

MOCK 1.0: DE Jonathan Allen, Alabama

3. CHICAGO BEARS

DE Jonathan Allen: The Bears could reach for a quarterback here, but if they can't get Trubisky, their best bet might be to use their second-rounder and trade back into the bottom of the first round to find that passer.

MOCK 1.0: Trubisky

4. JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

RB Dalvin Cook, Florida State: Is this too high for a running back? Maybe, but this also gives the Jaguars a badly needed piece to their puzzle, with the chance for vital secondary upgrades in future rounds thanks to ample depth.

MOCK 1.0: Cook

5. TENNESSEE TITANS (FROM RAMS)

S Jamal Adams, LSU: The Titans could go for defensive backs with both of their first-round selections ... but the value is a bit better for a safety than a cornerback at this spot.

MOCK 1.0: Adams

6. NEW YORK JETS

DE Solomon Thomas, Stanford: On a team filled with needs, Thomas can be considered the best player on the board, and can help a pass rush that struggled last year.

MOCK 1.0: CB Marshon Lattimore, Ohio State

7. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

S Malik Hooker, Ohio State: Michigan's Jabrill Peppers is also a possibility here as the Chargers look for secondary help.

MOCK 1.0: Same

8. CAROLINA PANTHERS

RB Leonard Fournette, LSU: Fournette might not be the right fit for some teams, and his ankle issues could lead others to opt to look elsewhere, but with a 4.51-second 40 time, the 240-pounder might be what the Panthers need.

MOCK 1.0: OT Cam Robinson, Alabama

9. CINCINNATI BENGALS

WR Corey Davis, Western Michigan: Help to take pressure off A.J. Green and give Andy Dalton another target is essential.

MOCK 1.0: Thomas

10. BUFFALO BILLS

WR Mike Williams, Clemson: Questions linger about the quarterback situation, and that could be a target here if the Bills don't address it in the next two weeks.

MOCK 1.0: Same

11. NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

CB Marshon Lattimore, Ohio State: New Orleans' defense is so beset with issues that the Saints can target one of several positions and fill an area of need.

MOCK 1.0: ILB Reuben Foster, Alabama

12. CLEVELAND BROWNS (FROM EAGLES)

QB Deshaun Watson, Clemson: He did nothing to hurt himself in his Combine workout, although it wasn't going to spotlight the areas at which he still has work to do, either.

MOCK 1.0: Same

13. ARIZONA CARDINALS

WR John Ross, Washington: Arizona has succeeded with calculated risks on talent with issues, and Ross fits in, with blazing straight-line speed and a lengthy litany of injury issues.

MOCK 1.0: CB Tre'Davious White, LSU

14. PHILADELPHIA EAGLES (FROM VIKINGS)

CB Quincy Wilson, Florida: This is where the draft could start getting interesting in the secondary, with more talent than the first round can likely allow.

MOCK 1.0: CB Marlon Humphrey, Alabama

15. INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

OLB Takkarist McKinley, UCLA: Tennessee DE Derek Barnett is another possibility here, but in a draft with good edge rushers, the Colts must capitalize and find one early.

MOCK 1.0: Same

16. BALTIMORE RAVENS

TE O.J. Howard, Alabama: The film is good, the workout was terrific and his Senior Bowl only helped his stock. Howard is the complete package at his position.

MOCK 1.0: Same

17. WASHINGTON REDSKINS

DE Derek Barnett, Tennessee: Arguably the best defensive player on the board at this point.

MOCK 1.0: S Jabrill Peppers, Michigan

18. TENNESSEE TITANS

CB Teez Tabor, Florida: The Titans have major secondary issues, and this draft offers a great chance for immediate help with their two first-round picks.

MOCK 1.0: Wilson

19. TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

OT Garrett Bolles, Utah: The Bucs need some more nastiness up front -- and need to protect Jameis Winston, although they could think long and hard about adding an electric weapon to help the third-year quarterback.

MOCK 1.0: Ross

20. DENVER BRONCOS

RB Christian McCaffrey, Stanford: If the Broncos focus on their offensive line in free agency, they will have the freedom to target McCaffrey, who could open up horizons for Emmanuel Sanders, C.J. Anderson and Demaryius Thomas by the attention he will draw from defenders.

MOCK 1.0: Same

21. DETROIT LIONS

OT Cam Robinson, Alabama: Pass rusher is a distinct possibility for the Lions here, but their O-line looks set to take a hit in free agency. Western Kentucky's versatile Forrest Lamp could also slide into this spot.

MOCK 1.0: DE Taco Charlton, Michigan

22. MIAMI DOLPHINS

LB Haason Reddick, Temple: An additional dash of explosiveness and versatility could help a Dolphins defense that gave up plenty of yards but came up with some crucial stops last year.

MOCK 1.0: Same

23. NEW YORK GIANTS

RT Ryan Ramczyk, Wisconsin: As with the Lions at No. 21, the Giants could have Lamp on their board, but Ramczyk is the kind of tough offensive lineman that has thrived in New York.

MOCK 1.0: Same

24. OAKLAND RAIDERS

LB Reuben Foster: After his incident with a hospital worker led to his Combine dismissal, character questions could knock Foster down to this point..

MOCK 1.0: Tabor

25. HOUSTON TEXANS

QB Patrick Mahomes, Texas Tech: It would be a stunner, but Mahomes might fit the Texans better than Notre Dame's DeShone Kizer, who is still on the board.

MOCK 1.0: Kizer

26. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

S Jabrill Peppers, Michigan: Offensive line seems an obvious target, as well, but if Peppers is still on the board, how can Seattle pass him up with Earl Thomas showing signs of age?

MOCK 1.0: Bolles

27. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

ILB Jarrad Davis, Florida: Davis or Vanderbilt's Zach Cunningham would allow the Chiefs to be ready if Derrick Johnson can't come all the way back

MOCK 1.0: Same

28. DALLAS COWBOYS

DE Charles Harris, Missouri: The disruptive Harris (18.5 tackles for losses last season) is what the Cowboys need for a front seven that needs more explosive plays.

MOCK 1.0: Barnett

29. GREEN BAY PACKERS

LB T.J. Watt, Wisconsin: Green Bay could be overhauling its pass rush this year, and Watt would help that process along.

MOCK 1.0: Same

30. PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Edge rusher Taco Charlton, Michigan: Pass rush has to be the priority for the Steelers, who need more youth off the edge.

MOCK 1.0: OLB Tim Williams, Alabama

31. ATLANTA FALCONS

CB Tre'Davious White, LSU: Defensive line could be in play here, but the Falcons' most pressing defensive need dovetails with a strong cornerback class.

MOCK 1.0: DT Malik McDowell, Michigan State

32. NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

TE David Njoku, Miami (Fla.): With Rob Gronkowski injury-prone and Martellus Bennett set to test the market, the Patriots would do well to refresh their complement at the position.

MOCK 1.0: Same

Mason's Mailbag: What do teams get out of the Combine?

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
March 6, 2017

@mikebirty

#askmase Does the combine and the tests, measurements and drills make a difference? Isn't two or three years of game tape more important?

Always, always, always, the tape is more important.

You're trying to do three things at the Combine.

- 1) Through interviews, get a feel for the player's character and football I.Q.
- 2) Learn all you can from the comprehensive medical checkups about injury history and determine if there are any concerns that force a change in grade or take a prospect in question off the board entirely.
- 3) Watch the workouts with a focus on seeing that players reach the baseline for their respective positions/skill sets. For example: Does an offensive tackle have arms that are shorter than the baseline for his position, perhaps forcing him to be considered more as a guard?

Could you see the Broncos picking up a veteran WR such as Alshon Jeffrey or the newly released Brandon Marshall? If these guys are serious about winning and not going for the large contract. I believe that if they are serious about playing for a contender I believe that adding one of these would fit perfectly and add that third WR we have been needing.

-- Ethan Stanton

A No. 3 wide receiver would not be a surprise, but I highly doubt it would be Alshon Jeffrey, because he's going to get No. 1 receiver money on the market and the Broncos can't approach that -- and shouldn't, given their other needs. With Jeffrey and others of his ilk, you also have to consider the role -- why would you go somewhere to be a No. 3 when you're clearly a No. 1 option? Further, you want the receiver to be a fit with the skill sets already on hand -- so you would want a receiver whose strengths don't match those of at least one or both of the current starters.

Do you think that the Broncos could use their four extra picks to trade for a left and right OT or would it cost more than that?

-- Jonathan Erickson

It depends on the quality of the offensive tackles acquired. But why trade the draft farm when you can accomplish the same thing in free agency?

I agree with you and Andy Lindahl on your podcast -- how come the media and Bronco fans don't give Trevor the respect he deserves? He played with a poor offensive line and a bum shoulder.

-- Drew Norem

Because broad narratives and hot takes are easier than a more nuanced and reality-based approach that takes into account context, surrounding talent, the experience of the player, etc.

Why are they keeping the offensive line coach when he's had the worst line in the last few years?

-- Kyle Katz

You must be thinking of another team or a mirror-universe version of the Broncos, maybe the one in the parallel-universe episode of Star Trek where Mr. Spock has a goatee. This team has two new O-line coaches.

Would you think Luke Joeckel would be a perfect fit for left tackle?

-- Chris Ashley

No, not considering how much he struggled at the position in Jacksonville. Guard is a better fit for him at this point, in my estimation.

Why not follow the Patriots formula of developing small quick tight ends or h-backs...that always run option routes to get open...Instead of expecting these position players to be large and slow run blockers? I don't think Julian Edelman is that magnificent an athlete...why not copy this winning formula?

-- John Christensen

I think you're sort of overlooking the primary piston that makes the Patriots' offensive engine roar. Further, there is nothing "small" about tight ends who weigh 265 pounds (Rob Gronkowski) and 275 pounds (Martellus Bennett).