

# Kiszla: Will Tony Romo prove Cowboys owner Jerry Jones knows more about QBs than John Elway?

By Mark Kiszla  
Denver Post  
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Quarterback Tony Romo and everybody in Broncos Country are being held hostage in a staredown between Denver general manager John Elway and Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones.

Free Romo!

Free-agent frenzy, when NFL teams overpay for their shortcomings and compound mistakes by hoping money turns a B+ player into a Pro Bowler, is about to commence. But the madness can't really start in Denver until Jones releases Romo from the \$44 million in base compensation remaining on his contract, taking a severe salary cap hit in the process.

Romo wants out of Dallas. The Broncos would like to talk to the 36-year-old quarterback about riding off into the sunset as a Super Bowl champion, the way Peyton Manning did.

But why would Jones want to make the process quick and easy for anybody?

Jones ain't Mother Teresa. He's a businessman with an ego the size of Texas. Forget what's best for Romo. And forget what's best for the Broncos, who aren't ever going to win a championship with Trevor Siemian as their starting quarterback. The first person Jones wants to do right by is Jones.

Unless Jones is a sentimental fool, it makes sense for him to continue the search for a greater fool who is willing to offer Dallas some trade compensation for Romo, or at least wait to release his veteran quarterback after June 1, in order to take advantage of cap rules to lessen the pain of a \$20 million hit in dead money.

Elway won't blink. It behooves the Broncos to stay calm and wait patiently for Romo's release, then see how cheaply they might obtain a veteran with a sterling quarterback rating and an ugly medical history. Yes, we all want our answers piping hot and fast from the microwave. Landing Romo, however, is a slow play, requiring the patience of a fly-fisherman.

While I shamelessly pine for Romo, Elway can't sit around fantasizing about how Romo could help him beat Tom Brady and the New England Patriots. Elway has roster holes to fill and money to spend in free agency. If the Broncos can sign Arizona defensive lineman Calais Campbell to plug a gaping hole in their run defense or lure free agent T.J. Lang from Green Bay to play right guard, does Elway really want to sit and save his nickels to sign Romo?

There's one aspect of romancing the Romo that hasn't been addressed in polite company: Although considered blasphemy in these parts, could it be Jones knows more about quarterbacks than Elway does?

Elway thought he beat Jones to the punch a year ago, when Denver traded up to draft Memphis quarterback Paxton Lynch, who was also coveted by the Cowboys. Jones had to settle for selecting Dak Prescott in the fourth round. All Prescott did as a rookie was throw 23 touchdown passes, earn a Pro Bowl invitation and lead Dallas to the playoffs.

Advantage, Jones.

And now the Broncos are chasing Romo, made superfluous in Dallas by a young quarterback whom Elway undervalued in the draft?

Elway hates to lose.

The Broncos need Romo. If everybody's patient, and he's willing to play in Denver for a salary of \$10 million plus incentives, then signing him is a no-brainer.

But here's betting Elway would rather let Romo rot on the Cowboys' bench (or even worse, go to work in Houston) than let Jones get the best of him again.

# The Cowboys are expected to release Tony Romo. Next stop: Denver?

By Nicki Jhabvala  
Denver Post  
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Let the chase begin.

According to multiple media outlets, the Cowboys have informed quarterback Tony Romo that they will release him Thursday, when free agency begins, setting in motion an expected tour of teams that could end in Denver.

Romo, 36, has three years remaining on his contract with the Cowboys that has \$19.6 million in dead money for 2017. When the Cowboys cut him, they will have that money on their books, either in its entirety in 2017, or spread over the next two seasons if they designate him a post-June 1 release. If they opt for the latter, however, they will have to carry his full \$24.7 million salary-cap charge until June 2, severely limiting their options in free agency.

It's a hefty price to pay but really the only option for Dallas, who handed the starting quarterback job to rookie Dak Prescott last season while Romo recovered from his latest injury.

For weeks, months even, speculation had led to this point, where Romo would be let go and in search of a new home. And for both financial and personnel reasons, the Broncos appear a possible destination, but certainly not the only one. The Houston Texans, who spent big on quarterback Brock Osweiler a year ago, then watched him struggle as a starter, could also be a strong contender.

But the Broncos have about \$13 million more in salary-cap space (\$36.3 million, according to the NFL Players Association's records), a pair of 1,000-yard receivers in Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, and the league's leading pass defense for two years running.

"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," former agent Joel Corry said. "They have a lot more cap room. They should have more flexibility salary-wise with Romo because they don't have a quarterback (Osweiler) making \$16 million that they can't do anything about because his contract is fully guaranteed."

Broncos general manager John Elway has plenty of money to retool and revamp his roster, including at the quarterback position, should he want to.

Over the last three months, including his most recent appearance at the NFL combine in Indianapolis, Elway danced around the topic primarily because of tampering rules. When asked about the potential to bring in a veteran quarterback, Elway simply said the Broncos will consider any and everything at their disposal when free agency begins.

"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. All those things will come into discussion. Once we get to that point, we'll know where we are and we'll kick the tires on everything and do our homework on everything and make the best decision for what we think is right for the Broncos."

When last healthy, in 2014, Romo led the NFL in multiple passing categories. But he's started only four games over the last two years because of injuries.

The Broncos are finalizing their new playbook, under head coach Vance Joseph and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy. It's expected to be a fluid system, one that will change weekly. It's also expected to be more pass-friendly, resembling more of the system McCoy ran in Denver when Peyton Manning arrived in 2012.

A healthy Romo would be fit the Broncos' system. And financially, they could sign him to an incentive-laden deal that would be cap-friendly but could allow him to make close to what he would have earned in Dallas.

But Elway is in no rush. Nor should he be if he believes Denver is Romo's first choice.

"If he wants to play for the Broncos, and that is his first choice and it is a clear-cut first choice, then that's going to shift the advantage to Elway financially and he's going to have to be more open to playing on a more team-friendly term than he would really want to, potentially," Corry explained. "... 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."

And when considering Romo, Elway has to consider the rest of his roster, too. His two young quarterbacks, Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, are due only about \$1.5 million in combined salary in 2017. If Romo arrives, does Siemian go, via trade? Or does Siemian stay, as an experienced and inexpensive insurance policy behind Romo? And if he stays, will his development stall as he waits behind Romo?

"That's a concern. Does it stunt their growth? Where does it put those guys?" Elway said. "How do they handle it? All of those type questions come into the discussion if were to go down that road."

The offensive line needs help, too, and a starter on the defensive line has to be found, which will cost Denver.

But the defense Elway built won't be together forever. Maybe Romo gives the Broncos a better shot at returning to the Super Bowl. Maybe the Broncos really are just "a quarterback away."

Or maybe Elway's biggest surprise is no surprise at all: sticking with Siemian and Lynch as his quarterbacks for now and the future.

"Everyone just thinks we just talk about next year, but we don't," Elway said. "We talk about the impact that has two, three, four years down the line. How does that affect us now, and eventually once we get through all of those scenarios, make a decision and see what happens. I think when you make a decision, whether it be a quarterback or an offensive linemen or whatever it is, especially in free agency, you talk about what that will do to you two, three, four years down the line."

# Broncos president on Romo: 'It will be interesting to see what we do'

By Mike Klis

9News

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Asked about Tony Romo, Denver Broncos' president Joe Ellis deflected with Hall of Fame-caliber poise.

"I'll leave that to John," Ellis said Wednesday in reference to his general manager John Elway. "I don't know what John's plans are specifically. I make a point of not asking him because then I would know and I'd have to tell you right now ... It will be interesting to see what we do. I'm sure John has a plan and he's ready to execute it."

Ellis met with 9News before he was elected into the Denver & Colorado Tourism Hall of Fame at the Colorado Convention Center. He has sat on the Visit Denver board for more than 16 years and is beginning his 23rd season with the Broncos, seventh as team president.

Like Pat Bowlen, the team owner he serves, Ellis doesn't meddle in football operations other than talk over the financial considerations with Elway. Romo, the Dallas quarterback who won't come cheap, is hardly the only prize on the Broncos' free-agent wish list. The Broncos have roughly \$35 million in cap space entering free agency, and more importantly, they have \$35 million in cash, if not a tad more, to spend.

"We're in good shape," Ellis said on the eve of NFL free agency. "It's never been and never will be an excuse. We're going to be aggressive I think. John has always been very smart looking at the value of each player, weighing that and determining that as it pertains whether we ultimately sign. We're not going to take any reckless chances and I don't expect him to do that but I'm sure he's going to be aggressive tomorrow and for several days after.

"There's kind of a rush in free agency and then things settle down and you often get value later on so we'll see what comes out of this."

Elway and the Broncos expressed interest in Arizona free agent defensive end Calais Campbell but he reportedly will sign with Jacksonville on Thursday, the first day of NFL free agency. The Jaguars have more than twice the salary cap room than Denver so they had the wherewithal to outbid their competition for the former Denver South High School star.

And so it goes. The Broncos will move on. Their first chance to improve their team that finished 9-7 and out of the playoffs last year is 2 p.m. Thursday, when the 2017 league season officially commences.

"I think there's some things in order, we'll see how it all shakes out," Ellis said. "I'm excited. It's a chance to improve your team. That's the goal and I'm sure we'll accomplish some of that. Still got to play the games on the field, though."

# Patience, offensive line help all part of Broncos' free agency plan

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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Free agency officially opens Thursday afternoon and while John Elway would prefer to never draft strictly for need, he believes you sign for need.

The Denver Broncos chief football decision-maker believes free agency is where the team should dive in to try to fill as many of the immediate needs as possible.

"I feel more comfortable if we can take care of some needs in free agency," Elway said. "I believe that there is a good blend in both. Free agency is there for a reason. 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. If we go into the draft [with needs], you have the propensity to reach. We try to stay out of the situation."

And it's clear what Elway's version of a successful trek through free agency will look at in the ramp-up to the April draft. Here are some things to look for:

**A little patience:** Elway says the word "value" every time he talks about signing a player in the open market. That means the Broncos often believe the best "values" in free agency are found after the frenzy of the opening 24 hours. So, everything the Broncos plan to do won't be done before the sun comes up Saturday morning.

**Agility:** When the Broncos have pounced early in free agency – most notably in 2014 – they've done it for players 29 or younger with clean injury reports and most of them heading into their second NFL contracts. So, if the Broncos move fast Thursday and Friday, chances are that's the profile of the player they are pursuing. They have the salary-cap space to participate in the opening swirl if they wish, and a player such as Dallas Cowboys guard Ronald Leary or Detroit tackle Riley Reiff fits that profile. Elway has used free agency plenty to put the roster together, but the Broncos have maintained their salary cap along the way because the players they've signed with the biggest deals have played through most, or all, of those contracts. They need that to happen again.

**Improvement:** After a pretty good run in free agency with Pro Bowl player after Pro Bowl player, the Broncos did not do all that well in 2016. Tackles Russell Okung and Donald Stephenson, their keynote signings a year ago, did not perform to their contracts. Okung already has been told the Broncos would not pay his option bonus that would have engaged the final four years of his deal and included \$21 million guaranteed. And Stephenson's future is a little cloudy, given his \$4 million base salary is guaranteed if he's on the roster next week, and Elway gave Stephenson a tepid vote of confidence when Elway was asked about the right tackle at the combine. The Broncos are open to bringing Okung back with a far more friendly deal, but they have to hit the mark better this time around overall.

**Offensive line help:** There is no bigger need on the Broncos roster because center Matt Paradis, who has had offseason surgery on each hip, is really the only proven player up front if he returns healthy. The

Broncos could be looking for as many as three or four new starters and are still trying to dial in what their offense will look like with the new coaching staff -- as Elway said this past week "we have to draft to something." The draft crop is decidedly thin in terms of immediate help in the offensive line, especially beyond the second round.

Defensive line help: The first free agent the Broncos entertained was defensive tackle Earl Mitchell, but Elway stuck to the "value" approach there and Mitchell signed a four-year, \$16 million deal with San Francisco. The Broncos will push to get Vance Walker back -- he's an unrestricted free agent -- and are open to re-signing Sylvester Williams if he can't find a better deal elsewhere. The draft is a little deeper in the defensive front, especially with edge players, but the Broncos will almost certainly sign at least one interior defensive lineman in free agency.

The Romo question: Until Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo is actually in the open market, any potential Broncos interest in him is idle chatter. But Elway has said the Broncos will consider "everything" and that translates as they'll take a look at Romo. But unlike the pursuit of Peyton Manning, when Elway said "there is no Plan B," he has given no such all-in indications this time around. He's talked a lot about how any decision has to make sense for more than this year. But the bottom line is that it impacts how much they could do elsewhere on the roster and if the Broncos' offensive line doesn't get the attention it needs, the Broncos are likely not as attractive a landing spot for Romo anyway. It's a bit of a roster quandary for Elway.

Overall, the Broncos believe they are close to pushing themselves back into the playoff conversation if they handle their business the right way in the weeks to come. And while they won't spend as much as they did in 2014, they have to do much better than they did last year.

# Mike McCoy's work on playbook will influence additions Broncos make

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
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Vance Joseph said his first phone call when he was hired as the Broncos' coach was to Mike McCoy to be the team's offensive coordinator.

When McCoy, a former Broncos offensive coordinator under both Josh McDaniels and John Fox, then joined Joseph's staff, Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway said, "I'm excited Mike's back."

As free agency opens Thursday afternoon and the Broncos' scouting staff disperses to attend college pro day workouts, McCoy's work will have a strong influence on how the Broncos proceed on both fronts.

Because Joseph, as the head coach, has had plenty of input on what he wants in an offense, but it's McCoy drawing the X's and O's. And the decisions the staff has made in recent weeks about what will be in that playbook will have plenty of impact on which players get added to the roster in free agency and the draft.

Asked at the scouting combine about how much of the playbook was finished, Joseph said: "I would say probably 60 percent ... probably 60 percent and moving forward [McCoy] is going to tweak some more things after the combine to finish it up."

That will eventually mean a lot to the quarterbacks on the roster, even if Tony Romo agrees to the kind of team-friendly, incentive-laden deal the Broncos would want in order to sign him. But it also means a lot in how the Broncos construct things at a position group of their greatest need: the offensive line.

For the third consecutive offseason, the Broncos are looking at significant turnover on the offensive line and will consider fixes in free agency. The Broncos will also give a long look at the position in the first two days of the draft.

But to do that most effectively, McCoy, Joseph and the offensive coaches will have to offer a clear description of the kinds of players they'd like.

"I've said, 'What do you want to do?' and he's said, 'whatever we do best,'" Elway said. "We have to draft to something and we don't know what we do best yet. ... We've got to try to find the best of both worlds. ... And Mike will do a good job of putting everybody in the position to be successful."

The Broncos are transitioning away from a zone-blocking scheme, which has linemen fire out in the same direction as they block players in specific areas on the field. It requires more mobility and often requires each lineman to make decisions quickly about the "most dangerous" defender in a particular area.

McCoy has said he would like to use zone-blocking principles at times, but also more man-on-man assignments, with linemen blocking specific gaps. Kubiak and his staff did mix in some man-on-man concepts at times, but McCoy expressed the desire to be able to do both in a season, or even a game, if needed and if the right group of linemen can be assembled.

There is also the matter of the Broncos' quarterbacks, even if Romo isn't signed because Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch have a different set of skills. So, McCoy's playbook work will also have to take that into account.

"Mike's challenge is finding an offense that fits both guys," Joseph said.

As the Broncos sign and draft players in the coming days and weeks, the names that are added will be players the Broncos believe fit, but they will also be hints at where those decisions on offense have been made.

# Cowboys to release all-time leading passer Tony Romo on Thursday

By Adam Schefter and Todd Archer

ESPN.com

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Tony Romo will soon no longer be a Dallas Cowboy.

The Cowboys will release the franchise's all-time leader in passing yards and touchdowns on Thursday, sources told ESPN, allowing him the chance to sign with another team if he desires while removing any doubt that they have the utmost faith in Dak Prescott.

Cowboys owner and general manager Jerry Jones' decision to release Romo was the result of a conversation between the two on Tuesday, league sources told ESPN's Ed Werder.

A source told Werder that Romo did not have to pressure Jones to release him before the official beginning of NFL free agency so he could pursue opportunities with another franchise.

Jones told Romo that he had waited to determine whether another team might offer the Cowboys something in a trade for the oft-injured quarterback. When that failed to occur following the NFL scouting combine, Jones told Romo he would release him and make him a June 1 designation, which will save the Cowboys \$14 million against the cap this year.

Romo will still count \$10.7 million on the 2017 cap and \$8.9 million on the 2018 cap.

The Cowboys are visiting with veteran quarterback Josh McCown on Wednesday, who would replace Romo as the backup quarterback if he signs with the team.

McCown was one of the Cowboys' targets last summer after Kellen Moore broke his ankle in the first week of training camp, but the Cleveland Browns' asking price was too high. McCown, who turns 38 in July, was released by the Browns earlier in the offseason after a two-year run with the club.

The release of Romo, who turns 37 in April, does not come as much surprise, although it was a move that pained Jones because of the close relationship he forged with Romo over 14 years.

Prescott's play in 2016, which earned him Offensive Rookie of the Year honors, and the Cowboys' a 13-3 record, all but clinched the decision. While the Cowboys could have afforded the \$24.7 million salary-cap figure, in reality paying a backup quarterback \$14 million made little sense.

Romo's rise to the top of the Cowboys' all-time passing chart started as an undrafted free agent out of Eastern Illinois in 2003. He eschewed a larger signing bonus from the Denver Broncos at the time to join the Cowboys.

Then-coach Bill Parcells took an immediate liking to Romo; however, he did not throw a pass in a game until 2006. After replacing Drew Bledsoe at halftime against the New York Giants, Romo made the first

start of his career on Oct. 29, 2006, against the Carolina Panthers, throwing for 270 yards and a touchdown in a 35-14 win.

He sparked the Cowboys to a 9-7 finish and spot in the playoffs, but that season ended when he dropped a snap on a potential winning field goal attempt against the Seattle Seahawks in the wild-card round.

In his first full season as the starter in 2007, Romo threw for a then-franchise-record 4,211 yards, a mark he would set twice more in his career, and a franchise record 36 touchdown passes. The Cowboys finished with the best record in the NFC (13-3) but lost in the divisional round of the playoffs.

Romo has a career record of 78-49, but he never was able to get the Cowboys past the divisional round of the playoffs in four playoff appearances. His 34,183 passing yards and 248 touchdown passes are the most in team history, but with Hall of Famers Roger Staubach and Troy Aikman combining for five Super Bowl wins, Cowboys quarterbacks are judged on championships.

Romo also holds team records for most 300-yard passing games (46), multiple touchdown pass games (79) and consecutive games with a touchdown pass (38). In 2012, he threw for a club-record 4,903 yards and on Oct. 6, 2013, against the Denver Broncos, he threw for a franchise record 506 yards. He owns the NFL record with a touchdown pass in 41 straight road games.

Back injuries started to slow Romo down. In 2013, he had two back surgeries, including a discectomy before the season finale. He suffered two transverse process fractures in 2014 but missed just one game in leading the Cowboys to a 12-4 record and NFC East title.

In 2015, he suffered a broken left collarbone against the Philadelphia Eagles and missed seven games. He rebroke the collarbone in his second game back and missed the final five games. The Cowboys went 1-11 without Romo.

After undergoing collarbone surgery last spring, Romo said his back felt as strong as it had in years, but on the third play from scrimmage in a preseason game against Seattle, he was awkwardly driven to the turf by Cliff Avril and suffered a compression fracture in his back.

Romo's absence allowed Prescott, the Cowboys' second fourth-round pick last year, to win the starting job. After losing the season opener, the Cowboys won a franchise-record 11 straight games. Prescott finished his rookie season with 23 touchdown passes and just four interceptions. He also set a team record for a quarterback with six rushing touchdowns.

Disappointed he would not have the chance to win the job back, Romo diffused any controversy with a heartfelt statement backing Prescott upon his return. He served as the backup for the first time since 2006 and saw action in just one game, throwing a touchdown pass on his lone drive in the 2016 finale against the Eagles.

# Where Tony Romo should go

By NFL Insider

ESPN.com

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Tony Romo will be released by the Dallas Cowboys on Thursday after 14 seasons with the team, according to ESPN's Adam Schefter and Todd Archer.

We asked our panel of six NFL Insiders to weigh in on Romo's future and which teams he should be interested in.

If you're Romo, who's your first option?

Matt Bowen, NFL writer: Both the Houston Texans and the Denver Broncos make sense. They're two contenders that feature top-tier defenses and the run game. I see the Broncos as the better fit, however, given the play-calling of new offensive coordinator Mike McCoy and the weapons on the roster. With Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, Romo gets two established players at wide receiver who will facilitate even more production in 2017. Yes, I understand the concerns about the offensive line in Denver, but we are still in early March. General manager John Elway has plenty of time to upgrade the front via free agency, and the draft to give Romo some security in the passing game.

John Clayton, senior NFL writer: All signs are beginning to point to Romo signing with the Broncos at a reduced cost. The Texans would be the second option. You can see the way the market is shaping up. Tyrod Taylor is now staying with the Buffalo Bills. The Chicago Bears will probably beat out the New York Jets for Mike Glennon. Romo isn't going to go to the Cleveland Browns. Romo wants to win, and Denver gives him the best chance. Elway won't pay Romo top dollar, but he knows a healthy Romo can take Denver deep into the playoffs. If he gets hurt, the Broncos can go back to Trevor Siemian, a quarterback Elway likes and believes is a competent NFL starter.

Mark Dominik, NFL front office Insider: I'd pick Denver. The Broncos know the blueprint after bringing in Peyton Manning in 2012, and they understand that their offensive line needs a lot of work. Denver also has the weapons on offense to make the short-term partnership work.

Mike Sando, senior NFL writer: The Texans and then the Broncos. The order switches if the Broncos upgrade their offensive line enough to offset the advantages Romo would have playing indoors.

Kevin Seifert, national NFL writer: I'd pick the Broncos over the Texans. I'd feel more comfortable with the Broncos' coaching staff, which includes a veteran offensive coordinator (McCoy) and quarterbacks coach (Bill Musgrave) with long histories of tweaking schemes to fit players and environments. I'd prefer the Broncos' receiving duo of Thomas and Sanders, and I'd trust Elway's drive to max out for 2017 more than I would the Texans' administration. And I wouldn't be concerned about the distance between Dallas and Houston and Dallas and Denver. A plane ride is a plane ride.

Field Yates, NFL insider: The Texans, just narrowly over the Broncos. The reasons echo what Mike has laid out, which include the question marks surrounding the Broncos' offensive line. Romo's availability traces back to the durability issue he has had. A steady offensive line is critical for his future. Signing with Houston would not involve a significant relocation for Romo, and the Texans' roster gives him the

best shot to win right away. The Titans made significant strides last season, and Andrew Luck calls Indianapolis home, but Houston still has a clearer path to the postseason than Denver playing in the AFC West.

What is a reasonable deal for Romo to get?

Matt Bowen, NFL writer: Romo's contract should be structured to protect the team if he fails to stay on the field for an entire season. Even with his past production and interest level I expect him to see on the market, the injury history isn't going away. Given the numbers being floated for Glennon, I would expect Romo to strike an incentive-laden deal that pays upward of \$17 million this season if he can answer the bell for the full 16-game slate.

John Clayton, senior NFL writer: A reasonable deal from the Broncos might not seem reasonable in the big picture. If he's willing to sign for about \$12 or \$13 million and make up about \$5 million in incentives, I think that's fair. Maybe Elway will look at Glennon's contract. If Glennon gets \$15 million, Elway could bump the pay to \$15 million. Romo is a luxury for the Broncos, but the Broncos give Romo the best chance to try to get to the Super Bowl.

Mark Dominik, NFL front office insider: I expect him to get \$16-20 million a year on a two- or three-year deal. Some of that money will come in incentives based on playing time, and some will be attached to how far the Broncos get in the playoffs, like they did with Manning.

Mike Sando, senior NFL writer: A reasonable deal from a playoff-contending team such as Denver or Houston would give Romo the ability to earn about what he would have earned in Dallas, provided he plays in all the games and succeeds in the playoffs. Manning had to take that type of deal from Denver and did so. Romo would have to prove winning is important to him. No team should sink tons of guarantees into a player who hasn't played much lately and hasn't been able to stay on the field when he did play.

Kevin Seifert, national NFL writer: You've got to guarantee him enough money to make it worth his while even if he doesn't play a full season. That means paying him at or near the \$18 million his current deal was averaging, with a chance to get more than \$20 million based on incentives. Especially if he has interest from more than one team.

Field Yates, NFL insider: There's little doubt that a team must protect itself in a deal for Romo given his age and recent injuries. The going rate for quarterbacks is, well, a lot. A deal that pays Romo up to \$18 million (or more) per season isn't outlandish, provided it's earned through his being on the field. There isn't a ton of precedent for a highly coveted quarterback who will be 37 when the season starts. Denver protected itself on its Manning deal on a year-to-year basis. A team might need to do so on a game-by-game basis with Romo by including lucrative playing-time incentives and roster bonuses.

If a contender doesn't show interest, should Romo join an up-and-comer or call it a career?

Matt Bowen, NFL writer: I can't see Romo walking away from the game this year. Every player -- regardless of position -- believes he can stretch out another year or two in the league despite what his body is saying. That's the inner drive, the competitiveness that allows these guys to survive year-to-year in the NFL. Maybe Romo doesn't get a call from Houston or Denver, but that doesn't mean he won't have another opportunity to play ball (and start) in 2017.

John Clayton, senior NFL writer: If Romo can't land in Denver or Houston, he might have to consider retiring and going into broadcast. He doesn't need to join an up-and-comer. His body has taken too many hits, and he's too prone to injury. He needs to go to a team that has a chance to win. He deserves that. If the Jets weren't letting so many players go, he might consider them. I still stay it's Denver, Houston or come back to Dallas as a backup.

Mark Dominik, NFL front office insider: I don't think he will hang it up. I think he wants to prove something to himself and the NFL. If no contender makes a play for him, one surprise team that could make some sense is Jacksonville.

Mike Sando, senior NFL writer: That's up to him completely. What is important to him at this stage of his career? Is it a paycheck? Is it winning? Does he think he can play several more seasons? If so, he could play with a noncontending team for a year, then reassess his options.

Kevin Seifert, national NFL writer: If that's the case, he should just sit tight before making any long-term decisions. There will be a point this spring or summer when an established starter gets hurt or a team grows dissatisfied with its situation and suddenly has interest. Look at what happened in Minnesota last summer. If he really wants to play in 2017, but only in the right situation, he probably will just need to be patient.

Field Yates, NFL insider: Frankly, I can't see a scenario in which a contender doesn't show interest. There are enough teams -- it only takes one -- that are within reach of taking the next step that Romo's services will be coveted. The NFL is perpetually seeking answers at quarterback. Romo's résumé is far too strong for contenders to overlook.

# Cowboys prepared to release Tony Romo, paving way for Broncos to talk to him

By Troy Renck  
KMGH  
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The Dallas Cowboys continue to inch toward the logical conclusion of an emotional breakup.

An anticipated outcome will unfold Thursday with the Cowboys releasing veteran quarterback Tony Romo, according to multiple reports. The move allows the Cowboys to spread out the remaining \$19.6 million on Romo's contract over two years. And it provides a clear pathway for the Broncos, and likely Texans, to engage in a battle for a quarterback for the second straight offseason.

A year ago, the Broncos lost in a bidding war for Brock Osweiler -- and won. Osweiler accepted a four-year, \$72 million deal and bombed, benched late in the season for Tom Savage. Romo's market has not taken shape, but he has told those close to him he prefers to go to a contender. He believes he can play multiple seasons at a high level, and the Broncos and Texans can make the argument they are one piece away.

Broncos general manager John Elway and coach Vance Joseph both admitted Denver would explore a quarterback in free agency, with Elway saying, "We are open to anything."

Translation: They are interested in pursuing Romo. This is not just an Elway-driven move, but the coaching staff as well. With the Broncos bent on rebounding from a nine-win season, Joseph would embrace a proven winner. Romo has won 78 games in the NFL, but just two in the postseason. When it appeared Romo would be released during last season, he identified Denver as a top destination.

It makes sense. The Broncos possess a championship-caliber defense -- especially if they get a run stuffer in the draft or free agency -- and sit one year removed from a title. They have also traveled this path successfully before, allowing for the seamless transition of Peyton Manning.

Let's be clear, Romo is not Manning. Manning had won a Super Bowl before arriving in Denver and suffered one significant injury his career. Romo has broken his collarbone multiple times and fractured his L1 vertebrae in the preseason a year ago. He played in the preseason to see if his body would hold up, and he suffered the injury on the first hit. And remember Romo will be 37 in April, having started four times in two seasons.

The issue when the Broncos meet with Romo is contract parameters, injury protection, and his desire to be a Bronco. Elway has carved a reputation on finding a number he's comfortable with -- and staying close to it. He walked away from a potential Colin Kaepernick deal last spring when unable to land the quarterback at the desired salary. According to sources, the Broncos would like Romo to take an annual deal in the \$10 to \$12 million range with active roster/playoff incentives to reach \$14 to \$15 million. There would also likely be clauses to provide cover for injuries, too, making the structure of the deal fascinating. Manning had to pass yearly physicals on his neck as part of his contract.

Elway's recruiting pitch will be strong. The Broncos can draw on their past experience with Manning, point to their stout defense, and cite Mike McCoy's veteran-friendly offense which calls for the football to come out quickly. The downside? The Broncos, even with a quicker release attack to avoid hits on the quarterback, need to upgrade the offensive line. Denver is open to bringing back left tackle Russell Okung, who is interested in returning. However, the Panthers and Giants are pursuing the veteran and may offer more money. The Broncos remain in the market for a right guard, including Detroit's Larry Warford, Green Bay's T.J. Lang. and, Minnesota's Brandon Fusco. They are also looking at right tackles with Riley Reiff among the tops available as Denver casts a wide net over top tier and second-level players.

While the parallels are drawn to Manning this is a different situation. The Broncos had no plan B in their pursuit of Manning, who was chased to replace Tim Tebow. Denver feels more comfortable in its quarterback position with Trevor Siemian, who exceeded expectations, and former first-round pick Paxton Lynch. Romo delivered a career year in 2014 with 34 touchdown passes, but has six touchdowns and seven picks over the past two years.

He desires to finish with a flourish. Denver and Houston offer the most likely destinations.

# Broncos eye Tony Romo, prepared to add offensive linemen

By Troy Renck

KMGH

March 9, 2017

"Everyone soon or late comes round by Rome" -- Robert Browning, English poet.

"Everyone soon or late comes round by Romo" -- The Denver Broncos, NFL team.

Thursday, the Dallas Cowboys will release quarterback Tony Romo, making him a free agent. The Broncos are interested, but figure to take a disciplined approach. They will want to know if Romo wants to be a Bronco, and will he play for a reasonable salary of \$10 to \$12 million? They are not inclined to become involved in a bidding war, and if Romo plans to go on multiple visits it's uncertain how long the Broncos would wait for a decision.

Regardless of the quarterback, the Broncos need offensive line help. The Broncos are zeroing in on targets, and are expected to add one, if not two offensive line free agents by the end of the week. Right guard remains high on the priority list. There are several that make sense for the Broncos, including Dallas' Ronald Leary, Green Bay's T.J. Lang, Detroit's Larry Warford and Cincinnati's Kevin Zeitler. Zeitler is the top-ranked player available with an accompanying rising price tag, but he knows Broncos coach Vance Joseph from their time together in Cincinnati.

At tackle, Cincinnati's Andrew Whitworth is coming off a solid season, and is intrigued by the Broncos. But it's fair to wonder if they will pay top dollar for a 35-year-old. That explains why they haven't ruled out bringing back left tackle Russell Okung, who is receiving interest from the Panthers, Giants and Chargers. Detroit's Riley Reiff bears watching. He has played right and left tackle during his career.

Again, the Broncos are tightening focus on linemen, hopeful of adding upgrades. Players can begin signing contracts as of 2 p.m. Thursday. The Broncos will be active in free agency with a focus on linemen and an eye peeled on Romo.

# Free agent buyers beware: Osweiler, others on spot in 2017

By Dave Campbell  
Associated Press  
March 9, 2017

The allure of high ceilings and quick fixes when free agency begins tends to camouflage the "buyer beware" signs strewn across the league landscape.

Each March, market-setting contracts with gargantuan guarantees are given out by NFL teams in search of veteran upgrades for their roster before the rookies are added through the draft and subsequent signings. The eagerness to make a splash or the unwillingness to see a targeted player join another club can cause executives to chase the sugar rush of an instant starter at the potential detriment of future salary cap management. The frustration of struggles at a particular position from the past season can trigger an overreach for replacements.

For the free agent class of 2016, there's still time to make amends for an underwhelming first year of a rich new deal. So as the market opens for 2017, here's a look back at some of the significant signees who didn't pan out last season and are looking for a bounce back:

## BROCK OSWEILER

The best quarterbacks never become free agents, of course, but Brock Osweiler brought enough intrigue and promise with his 6-foot-7 frame after playing behind Peyton Manning in Denver that Houston doled out \$37 million guaranteed on a four-year contract for the Broncos' backup about a month after they won the Super Bowl.

Seven solid starts at the end of the 2015 regular season while Manning was hurt was a small sample size, though, and more exposure for Osweiler yielded some rough moments. The Texans reached the playoffs with an AFC South title in a weak division and even made it to the second round, but Osweiler was in the bottom five in the league in completion percentage, interceptions and yards per attempt.

## DOUG MARTIN

Spending big on a team's own players is generally viewed as wiser strategy than on those outside the organization, given the familiarity with schemes and surroundings, but that's hardly a guarantee of success, either.

Tampa Bay brought back running back Doug Martin with a five-year deal featuring \$15 million guaranteed after he rushed for 1,402 yards and was an Associated Press All-Pro pick in 2015. Martin was slowed by hamstring problems and averaged just 2.9 yards per rush, the lowest in the NFL among ball carriers with at least 100 attempts. Then he received a four-game suspension for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing substances.

## SEAN SMITH

Sean Smith built up his coverage credentials over seven seasons as a cornerback with the Miami Dolphins and Kansas City Chiefs before signing a four-year contract with Oakland with \$20 million guaranteed over 2016 and 2017 to help the Raiders shore up a vulnerable secondary. He struggled from the start, and the Raiders were third-worst in the league in yards allowed per pass attempt. Smith needed shoulder surgery after the season. Former Raiders star Charles Woodson even called out Smith's substandard performance in a radio interview last fall.

#### COBY FLEENER

The tight end market has spiked in value over the last decade, and Coby Fleener cashed in with New Orleans last year after leaving Andrew Luck and the Indianapolis Colts. His first season with the Saints was unremarkable, after signing a five-year deal with nearly \$15 million in initial guarantees. Fleener had three touchdown catches. Over the last four games of the season, he totaled 84 yards on eight receptions while playing in a pass-friendly offense directed by Drew Brees that tight end Jimmy Graham once flourished in.

#### TASHAUN GIPSON

Leaving Cleveland for a five-year contract carrying \$12 million guaranteed, Gipson came to Jacksonville to fill a hole at free safety as part of an aggressive offseason makeover of the defense by the Jaguars. Though they finished in the top five in the NFL in several statistical categories for pass defense, the Jaguars fired head coach Gus Bradley while going 3-13. Gipson, who totaled 14 interceptions over his first four seasons with the Browns, picked off only one pass and expressed frustration with the conservative way he was used in the scheme.

# Seven teams Tony Romo could play for in 2017

By Nate Davis  
USA Today  
March 9, 2017

All indications point to Tony Romo becoming a free agent for the first time in his 14-year career on Thursday, when the Dallas Cowboys will cut their longtime quarterback, according to multiple reports. Now the question becomes, where will Romo play next? A month ago, we listed eight teams that appeared like compelling destinations for the four-time Pro Bowler. But the NFL landscape shifts quickly. Here's a fresh outlook on the most sensible places for Romo to seek a fresh start:

Makes sense

1. Denver Broncos: They rode an elite defense and a veteran quarterback to a title two years ago and could certainly replicate that formula in 2017 by signing Romo in hopes he can provide the same leadership — and, perhaps, superior physical ability and production to the 2015 version of Peyton Manning. And if the Broncos land Romo, they would also have the option of flipping one of their young in-house passers, Trevor Siemian or 2016 first rounder Paxton Lynch, for draft pick compensation from a quarterback-needy club while definitively grooming the other as the long-term replacement.

2. Houston Texans: Staying in Texas is Romo's preference, according to an ESPN report last month. Houston would certainly give him the opportunity to win immediately and possibly compete for a Super Bowl in a conference that appears wide open if the New England Patriots falter. But how much are the Texans willing to spend after last year's Brock Osweiler fiasco? How much is Romo willing to settle for and/or how open is he to playing on an incentive-laden deal? And is the team willing to pour limited cap resources into another quarterback — and probably O-line upgrades to protect Romo — for a high-risk roll of the dice?

Maybe?

3. Chicago Bears: This might be the "hometown" option given Romo attended nearby Eastern Illinois and grew up in Wisconsin. With a defense that seems on the verge of becoming special and compelling youngsters on offense (RB Jordan Howard, WRs Cameron Meredith and Kevin White), the Bears might not be as far away from contending as last year's 3-13 record would indicate — and a major upgrade at quarterback could certainly translate into a big jump in the standings. However with Mike Glennon apparently set to sign with Chicago, the Bears would have to change course quickly.

4. Washington Redskins: If they trade Kirk Cousins, and if Romo would consider it — Cowboys owner Jerry Jones has hinted at an implied understanding that the quarterback would never join the NFC East rivals — it's a union that makes obvious sense since it would theoretically allow Washington to remain relevant while allowing Romo multiple chances to prove to his former employer that they made a mistake.

5. Jacksonville Jaguars: They surfaced as a possibility last week. A talented group of wideouts, an ascending defense and the No. 4 pick of the upcoming draft could all be factors that might attract a quarterback in the twilight of his career. But importing Romo would be tantamount to admitting the

Blake Bortles experiment is a failure, and the franchise would suffer a huge setback over the long run if Romo can't physically answer the bell.

Long shots

6. Kansas City Chiefs: Maybe Romo would offer just enough of an upgrade over Alex Smith that this team could finally make some serious noise in postseason. But coach Andy Reid's loyalty to Smith sure sounded unwavering during the combine, and the recent financial commitments to S Eric Berry and G Laurent Duvernay-Tardif don't leave much room for another major move.

7. Minnesota Vikings: Will Teddy Bridgewater play again? Is Sam Bradford, who's under contract for one more year, good enough to lead this team to the playoffs? Might adding Romo help lure RB Adrian Peterson back home and maybe attract others to a team that has a championship-caliber defense that it would love to showcase in the Super Bowl, which will be staged in Minneapolis in 10 months? At minimum, food worth GM Rick Spielman's thought.

# Tony Romo must make one big selling point, and Broncos and Texans aren't shoo-ins as perfect fits

By Charles Robinson

Yahoo.com

March 9, 2017

One series. Four passes. More mystery than ever. That's the Tony Romo package.

As much as the NFL world at large is rushing to answer where the soon-to-be former Dallas Cowboy will land, there is a significant blind spot when it comes to who should want Romo now. Not just because he turns 37 in April. And not just because he'll go into the 2017 slate having played parts of basically four meaningful games in more than about 31 months. But also because nobody outside of the Cowboys organization has seen what Romo looks like day-in and day-out since he broke his back in the 2016 preseason.

This, to put it mildly, is a concern.

While it's assumed it was simply Romo's hefty contract that kept teams away, the truth is there was another element in play. The fact that nobody has legitimate tape on Romo since his back injury. Yes, he played one series in the regular-season finale and threw four passes (including a touchdown). But that hardly passes muster in the NFL when it comes to seeing how far a quarterback has recovered from a back injury. Teams want to see a guy get hit, want to see him absorb punishment, and then want to assess how he moves around after that occurs. Especially if his game, like Romo's, is steeped in mobility and improvisation. And the only team that really has an idea of how well he moves now is the Cowboys because they had him in practice every single day after he returned from his injury.

In that vein, it's fair for NFL franchises to wonder if team owner Jerry Jones and the Cowboys might know something they don't. And it's also fair to suspect that the Tony Romo free-agent tour is going to seek to answer these concerns and questions. Romo, like Peyton Manning before him, will be expected to visit teams and go through some workouts before laying ink to contract terms. Indeed, teams won't merely be selling themselves to Romo. He'll have some selling to do, too, be it to the Denver Broncos or Houston Texans or whoever else will be installing him as a quality bridge quarterback or last-hurrah savior.

Romo is an attractive player if he can still move well – not just throw well. And one regular-season series since November 2015 isn't a solid indicator of that. For that matter, neither are free-agent quarterback workouts. Teams need to see something before committing millions and shifting the axis of their franchise. And make no mistake, that's what some clubs will be doing with Romo. Just take the two teams that are expected to fit Romo's criteria – championship contender with a strong defense – for the next destination.

First, Denver. One of the most entertaining aspects of the "Where will Tony go?" conversation is listening to pundits talk about Romo's potential fit with the Broncos. There is consistent waxing about general manager/de facto team owner John Elway and how this all harkens back to the Manning signing in 2012. It seems like such a perfect match, right? But inside that conversation, there isn't a lot of

discussion about how this isn't the same team that won a Super Bowl after the 2015 season. Romo isn't dropping into the middle of a Super Bowl team, no matter who suggests it.

Lest we forget, the 2016 Broncos went 9-7. That's the roster Romo would be inheriting. Except that the offensive head coach, Gary Kubiak, is gone. And the defensive head coach, Wade Phillips, is gone. DeMarcus Ware likely won't be back, either. That's three very significant steadying voices out the door. There's also the matter of an offensive line that does not appear to be better than last season's mediocrity. This isn't ideal considering protecting Romo should be a higher priority now than at any point in his career. And on top of all of that, the Broncos would be setting both of their young quarterbacks – Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch – to the side in hopes that Romo somehow is the element that puts it all together again. That sounds like an acceptable compromise in theory. But NFL quarterbacks develop by playing, not sitting for three years.

These aren't small things. They're big, potentially changing 2018, 2019, 2020 and beyond. That's what a team would be tinkering with when it turns away from young quarterbacks it supposedly liked, in favor of a 37-year-old who hasn't played in two years. Or foolishly assume the 2017 Broncos are a duplicate of the 2015 edition. For that reason alone – the ripples that could extend for years after Romo's departure – it's worth the Broncos thinking long and hard about whether this is worth the gamble, both financially and architecturally.

As for the Houston Texans, well, it looks like they don't have much to lose. And if they've completely lost faith in Brock Osweiler ever being anything but a bottom-rung starter, then perhaps they don't. Maybe the next failure is the last no matter who is starting under center. But signing Romo accomplishes one thing: It waves the white flag on ever developing Osweiler after only one season – effectively making him one of the worst quarterback signings in the history of free agency. And it's hard to ever get that off a résumé, whether you're head coach Bill O'Brien or general manager Rick Smith.

Of course, if Houston signs Romo and he delivers big, the Osweiler mistake gets washed away in celebratory champagne. The narrative becomes how the Texans did the toughest thing and admitted a mistake. It becomes a badge of honor. The flip side to that coin: Should the Texans admit that mistake and cast their lot with Romo, he better succeed in a big way. Anything less will look like a continuation of poor decision-making and an utter lack of sense when it comes to resolving a never-ending quarterback problem.

In short, replace a failing Osweiler with a flopping Romo and someone – maybe everyone – loses their job. Maybe even the untouchable Smith. Maybe the same thing would happen if Houston continued a prolonged struggle with Osweiler, too. But gambling on a young quarterback and losing happens in the NFL. Gambling on a young quarterback and then ditching him after only one season for another failing option ... that tends to hang around on for an eternity.

Wherever Romo goes – whether it's Denver or Houston or an unknown suitor – it shouldn't be seen as the same no-brainer as the Manning signing. Romo isn't Manning. And it's unlikely he'll be walking into anything as good as the four-year window Manning stepped into with Denver, either. That leaves a lot of mystery and concern in this next step. And that's exactly why Romo will need to sell himself to teams every bit as much as the other way around.

# Tony Romo reportedly to be cut Thursday, ending ultimately unsatisfying Cowboys career

By Frank Schwab

Yahoo.com

March 9, 2017

Tony Romo has a strong argument as the greatest quarterback in Dallas Cowboys history.

Romo has the most passing yards in Cowboys history. His 248 passing touchdowns are 83 more than any other Cowboys quarterback. His 97.1 career passer rating is the fourth-best in the history of the NFL.

Yet, as Romo's Cowboys career comes to a close – ESPN's Adam Schefter and Todd Archer reported he will officially be cut Thursday – we all know why he won't be remembered as fondly as Roger Staubach or Troy Aikman. Romo played 13 seasons with Dallas and never won a Super Bowl, and never even made it there. The Cowboys won just two playoff games with Romo. That's not all his fault, but the failure to win big in the postseason is a big reason why he seemed to be under constant criticism.

The painful part about how Romo's Cowboys career ended is he had his best shot at a championship late in his career, like John Elway with the Denver Broncos. The problem was his body didn't cooperate. Dallas went 12-4 in 2014 and had high hopes in 2015, but Romo broke his collarbone twice. In 2016, Romo broke a bone in his back in the preseason and Dallas went 13-3 without him. No matter how good rookie Dak Prescott was last season, Romo will look back and probably believe Dallas would have had similar success if he stayed healthy. But that will be of little consolation.

That Romo could never lead the Cowboys to a Super Bowl doesn't erase all of his accomplishments, of course. Romo was undrafted out of Eastern Illinois, and became one of the greatest undrafted players in NFL history. It's incredibly rare for a quarterback in this era to slip completely through the draft and have the success Romo did in Dallas. Romo will have an argument for the Pro Football Hall of Fame, though he might need to get to a Super Bowl with his second team to get in. Even if he falls short of that, and even if he fails with his second team, Romo has had a great career – especially given how it started. It's a tremendous underdog story.

The Cowboys and Romo move on, and it has to be sad for both sides. Romo was Dallas' starter from 2006, when he went to the first of four Pro Bowls, to last season when the Cowboys couldn't remove the red-hot Prescott from the role. Dallas will wonder what might have happened had Romo been able to stay healthy the last couple years, when the Cowboys built a championship-quality team around him. Had it not been for Prescott's unbelievable rookie season, Romo might be getting another shot to lead the Cowboys to glory in 2017. It wasn't meant to be.

Romo, who will be 37 next season, gets a fresh start. The Broncos and Houston Texans are expected to be his most aggressive suitors. The Cowboys, coming off a tremendous season, have their quarterback of the future. Romo will return sometime after he has retired and be added to the Cowboys Ring of Honor. He had a great run with the Cowboys, even if he never got to experience the storybook ending. Maybe he can still write that perfect ending before his NFL career is done.

# Why Tony Romo will sign with Denver Broncos, not Houston Texans

By Hub Arkush  
Pro Football Weekly  
March 9, 2017

The Broncos give him best chance to win Super Bowl: Sure, Houston won a playoff game last season, whereas Denver followed up its Super Bowl triumph by missing the playoffs. True, the AFC South isn't nearly as imposing as the AFC West. Still, the Broncos' exceptional 'D' has a better chance of returning intact, while Houston likely will lose its best cover man and an underrated starting linebacker. Plus, with Mike McCoy and Bill Musgrave, Denver has the better offensive staff, well-equipped to adapting their offense to Romo's skill set.

We've seen this film before: With all due respect to Texans GM Rick Smith and coach Bill O'Brien, their lavishing \$37 million guaranteed on Brock Osweiler a year ago doesn't exactly compare to John Elway winning the Peyton Manning sweepstakes in 2011. Always looking to close, Elway's salesman success should give him an edge in the closest thing we've seen to the Manning free-agent tour, including the two megastar QBs sharing an agent — Tom Condon. And Elway has not only a ring as proof he'll successfully maximize Romo's remaining years, but extra incentive to land him after Houston stole Osweiler — a blessing in disguise — out from underneath him.

Houston's cap already 'Brock' full of Osweiler: The Texans have more than 14 percent of their cap committed to the QB position, according to Spotrac.com. By contrast, Denver has approximately two percent of its cap allotted toward 2016 first-rounder Paxton Lynch and 2015 seventh-rounder Trevor Siemian. Moreover, the Broncos have \$13 million more to work with overall this offseason than Houston and seemingly fewer key contract extension decisions on the near horizon than the Texans, who must account for stars DeAndre Hopkins and Jadeveon Clowney sooner than later.

Denver has better weaponry: In Demaryius Thomas and Emmanuel Sanders, the Broncos have one of the league's better one-two wideout punches. Hopkins is a stud, but Houston lacks a dependable secondary target until Will Fuller's hands improve or Braxton Miller and/or Jaelen Strong take a significant step forward. Is Lamar Miller a better option than C.J. Anderson? Perhaps, but Anderson has done it on bigger stages and was the preferred option last target for Miami despite the Dolphins drafting Miller. We'll give the O-line edge to Houston, and that's significant because of Romo's injury history, but both units must improve and we expect Elway to double up on his free-agent foray to improve the offense with an instant upgrade or two, like Andrew Whitworth or Ronald Leary. The Broncos have invested more recent draft capital along the offensive line, too, and their rock, center Matt Paradis, has as good a combination of track record, youth and talent as anyone on the Texans' front.

Jerry's world: Discounting the clout Jerry Jones, one of the NFL's most powerful men, carries would be a mistake, as would his well-documented relationship with Romo. The veteran's release is contingent on him not signing with certain teams, according to Broncos insider Benjamin Allbright, who reports Denver is a viable option. But is it possible Jones' Texas-sized ego can't handle sharing his beloved quarterback in state? It's possible Houston isn't in the running at all if Jones and Romo already agreed he'd head out of town.

Plan for Paxton: Elway isn't suddenly giving up on Lynch, whom he traded up in the first round to select 26th overall last April. The issue is the mental side hasn't caught up to Lynch's physical gifts, and another year of learning, this time behind an established signal caller, would be ideal. Romo handled the Dak Prescott situation with the utmost class a year ago; there's no concern about him mentoring Lynch without fear of looking over his shoulder. And if Romo lands in Denver, the Broncos might be able to flip Trevor Siemian to another QB-hungry club for a bit more than Houston can secure for Tom Savage.

2017 reunion: OK, this is us selfishly rooting for the reunion/revenge narrative, and the Cowboys will visit Denver in 2017, but they won't play the Texans. We haven't revisited the NFL's ratings issue much this offseason (you're welcome) but a Dak-Romo tilt would surely be among the season's highest-rated.

# 2017 NFL free agency: Top 101 available players

By Gregg Rosenthal

NFL.com

March 9, 2017

NFL free agency opens at 4 p.m. ET on Thursday, March 9. So, with the frenzy right around the corner, Gregg Rosenthal and Chris Wesseling have combined forces (and their own personal rankings) to come up with NFL.com's Top 101 Free Agents. These are the best players -- across all positions -- on the open market in 2017.

We'll continue to update our Top 101 Free Agents below, removing the listed players who are signed and adding certain guys who get released. The rankings are based on answering one simple question: Which player would we want to sign most?

1) Tony Romo, Dallas Cowboys quarterback: Romo might be one hit away from retirement. If he stays healthy, though, he's a legitimate franchise quarterback -- the golden calf of the modern NFL. Any player capable of making or breaking a team's season if everything goes right is the most valuable asset in a weak free-agent crop.

2) Alshon Jeffery, Chicago Bears wide receiver: Despite injury concerns, a PED suspension and a somewhat incomplete skill set, Jeffery could become the highest-paid receiver in football. No. 1 receivers with an uncanny ability to come down with 50-50 balls don't become available often in their prime.

3) Calais Campbell, Arizona Cardinals defensive end: There's no other player quite like Campbell, as thoughtful and savvy as he is physically overwhelming at 6-foot-8, 300 pounds. Still only 30 years old and able to play in any system, he would make a great "get over the hump" piece for a team looking for a title.

4) Brandon Williams, Baltimore Ravens defensive tackle: Teams can look for a one-man run-stopping solution in the draft, or they can pay Williams money similar to what Damon "Snacks" Harrison earned from the Giants last year.

5) Dont'a Hightower, New England Patriots linebacker: Author of two of the most important plays in the Patriots' last two Super Bowl victories, Hightower also has emerged as the best blitzing inside linebacker in football and a leader on New England's defense.

6) A.J. Bouye, Houston Texans cornerback: No NFL player raised his value more in 2016 than Bouye, who started the season as Houston's fourth cornerback and finished as a Pro Bowl-caliber starter on the league's stingiest total defense. He will emerge from the shadows to become a household name once he gets a mega contract.

7) Stephon Gilmore, Buffalo Bills cornerback: Gilmore has the reputation of a shutdown cornerback but was too often exploited in coverage last season. He boasts the starting experience and physical gifts to break the bank on the open market.

8) Kevin Zeitler, Cincinnati Bengals guard: A nasty-tempered blocker who wins with strength, Zeitler is a great fit for a power-based ground attack.

9) Adrian Peterson, Minnesota Vikings running back: Peterson is free agency's Rorschach test. He has played in just 20 games in the past three years, but he's bringing fresh legs and extra motivation to his next team. He eked out 1.9 yards per carry last year, but can the 2015 NFL rushing leader be blamed for a microscopic sample size and a pathetic offensive line? On the wrong side of age 30, he's still an obvious candidate for the best age-32 season in history.

10) Terrelle Pryor, Cleveland Browns wide receiver: It speaks to Pryor's monstrous upside that he was already giving fits to established cornerbacks -- such as Darrelle Revis, Josh Norman and Janoris Jenkins - in his first season as a full-time wide receiver.

11) Dontari Poe, Kansas City Chiefs defensive tackle: One of the most athletic big men in the game, Poe's effectiveness waned last season as he was outplayed by rookie teammate Chris Jones. Is he reaching the stage of his career where he's best served as a two-down run-plugger?

12) Johnathan Hankins, New York Giants defensive tackle: Hankins will never be an explosive pass rusher, but he teamed with Damon "Snacks" Harrison to shut down opposing rushing attacks in 2016. Few defensive tackles crash the backfield as consistently as Hankins.

13) DeSean Jackson, Washington Redskins wide receiver: Still in his prime, Jackson led the league with 17.9 yards per catch as a dangerous deep threat. In addition to the Redskins, he's expected to draw interest from the Buccaneers, Rams and Eagles.

14) Tony Jefferson, Arizona Cardinals safety: One of the league's unsung stars, Jefferson outplayed the more ballyhooed Tyrann Mathieu last season, consistently making impact plays at the line of scrimmage as well as in coverage.

15) T.J. Lang, Green Bay Packers guard: A foot injury and a "minor" hip surgery complicates free agency for the No. 2 guard in this free agency class. Some team should still invest big in one of the better right guards in football over the last few years.

16) Nick Perry, Green Bay Packers linebacker: Perry was a more consistent pass-rush threat than teammates Clay Matthews or Julius Peppers last season, and he showed great toughness playing through a broken hand in the playoffs.

17) Martellus Bennett, New England Patriots tight end: Bennett impressed the Patriots by playing through injury and has the rare versatility to excel in the running game or as a receiver. He will be difficult for New England to retain.

18) Andrew Whitworth, Cincinnati Bengals offensive tackle: It could be hard for Whitworth to get fair market value because he's 35 years old and there's an expectation he won't leave the Bengals. Despite his age, he's playing better than ever.

19) T.J. McDonald, Los Angeles Rams safety: Teams looking for a tone-setting presence in the secondary could do a lot worse than McDonald, whose de-cleating darts into opposing backfields make up for his allowing the occasional big play.

20) Riley Reiff, Detroit Lions offensive tackle: Reiff is pushed up this list by the scarcity at tackle. He can play on either side of the line and would upgrade plenty of blind-side situations around the league.

21) Zach Brown, Buffalo Bills linebacker: It's unlucky for Brown that Rex Ryan is out of the league just after Brown's breakout season playing in the Ryan brothers' system. There is a big drop-off in the inside linebacker market after Brown.

22) Larry Warford, Detroit Lions guard: Teams pay for pass protection first, but Warford can be a huge asset to any offense's running game at right guard.

23) Pierre Garcon, Washington Redskins wide receiver: It's just Garcon's luck that he's coming off a 1,000-yard season and two of his former coordinators (Kyle Shanahan and Sean McVay) just got head-coaching jobs.

24) Logan Ryan, New England Patriots cornerback: One of the best tackling cornerbacks in football, Ryan has the versatility and smarts to play inside and out. A monstrous postseason run will raise his price.

25) Alan Branch, New England Patriots defensive tackle: A behemoth earth-mover at 6-foot-6 and over 320 pounds, Branch was the linchpin of a stingy Patriots run defense that didn't allow a single running back to top 90 yards last season. At age 32, he's playing better than ever.

26) Micah Hyde, Green Bay Packers defensive back: Hyde has been overshadowed on Green Bay's defense, but he's one of the league's most versatile defensive backs, capable of playing cornerback and safety as well as returning punts.

27) Chris Baker, Washington Redskins defensive end: Still on the right side of the age-30 barrier, Baker is coming off back-to-back seasons as the Redskins' most disruptive defensive lineman.

28) Ricky Wagner, Baltimore Ravens offensive tackle: Strictly a right tackle, Wagner improved significantly during last season's contract run, keeping heat off Joe Flacco in a pass-heavy Ravens attack.

UPDATE: Wagner and the Lions have agreed in principle on a contract, NFL Network Insider Ian Rapoport reported Wednesday.

29) Barry Church, Dallas Cowboys safety: Dallas' beleaguered secondary outperformed its reputation last season, in no small part due to Church's career year.

UPDATE: Church is expected to join the Jaguars on a four-year deal, Rapoport reported Wednesday.

30) Jabaal Sheard, New England Patriots defensive end: Sheard's consistency slipped from its 2015 heights, but he bounced back from a November benching to team with Trey Flowers as an effective edge tandem during New England's Super Bowl run.

31) Nick Fairley, New Orleans Saints defensive tackle: A prime example of Bill Parcells' planet theory, Fairley is one of the few humans alive capable of exploding through offensive lines with freakish power and speed at 6-foot-4 and more than 300 pounds. He did an excellent job of rebuilding his value last season.

32) Kenny Britt, Los Angeles Rams wide receiver: Perennially a tease, Britt succeeded in reversing his reputation, recording the Rams' first 1,000-yard receiving season in a decade. Not bad for a wideout corralling errant passes from Case Keenum and Jared Goff.

33) Eddie Lacy, Green Bay Packers running back: The good news: Lacy averaged a career-high 5.07 yards per carry in a small sample size of work before a season-ending ankle surgery. The bad news: Through a series of weight fluctuations, his footwork has not returned to the preternaturally nimble form that sparked his success in 2013 and '14.

34) Brandon Marshall, New York Jets wide receiver: Can Marshall have honeymoon-season magic with a new team for a fourth straight time? He still has the skill set to be a solid possession receiver.

UPDATE: Marshall has signed a two-year, \$12 million deal with the Giants.

35) Jared Cook, Green Bay Packers tight end: One half of the best NFL play of the 2016 season, Cook proved in Green Bay that he can be a valuable piece to a Super Bowl contender.

36) Mike Glennon, Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback: Glennon was close to a league-average starting quarterback in his first two NFL seasons, which is especially impressive considering his coordinators were Mike Sullivan, Jeff Tedford and Marcus Arroyo. Glennon represents an intriguing blend of youth, experience and accuracy.

37) Michael Floyd, New England Patriots wide receiver: This ranking is more about the body of work from Floyd's career than his lost 2016 campaign. His physical skill set is worth buying low on.

38) Bennie Logan, Philadelphia Eagles defensive tackle: Logan is one of those no-nonsense run stuffers who inspire comments like "that guy is just a football player" by people trying to sound smart.

39) Kevin Minter, Arizona Cardinals linebacker: Minter proved to be an improved player in his second full season as a starter. Perhaps former coordinator Todd Bowles will show interest.

40) Prince Amukamara, Jacksonville Jaguars cornerback: Amukamara strangely didn't inspire much interest in free agency last year, then provided his usual above-average starting cornerback play. Guys like this usually get paid.

41) Torrey Smith, San Francisco 49ers wide receiver: Still just 28 years old, Smith is only one season removed from leading the league in yards per catch. He may be a one-trick pony, but speed pays.

42) Jamaal Charles, Kansas City Chiefs running back: Battling lingering knee problems, Charles has managed just 404 yards on 83 carries over the past two seasons. He boasted difference-making talent in his prime, but will have to accept a one-year, incentive-laden contract to prove he can still play at a Pro Bowl level at age 30.

43) Dre Kirkpatrick, Cincinnati Bengals cornerback: Kirkpatrick has what NFL teams pay for at cornerback: length and pedigree. Even though the former first-rounder's play has been uneven as a pro, he's likely to strike it rich.

44) Morris Claiborne, Dallas Cowboys cornerback: (See: Kirkpatrick blurb.) Claiborne played the best ball of his career before getting hurt in Dallas last season, but the injuries are not a new trend. He's missed 30 games since 2013.

45) Johnathan Cyprien, Jacksonville Jaguars safety: Cyprien is at his best near the line of scrimmage and is ripe to get overpaid after his first quality season as a pro.

46) Russell Okung, Denver Broncos offensive tackle: Okung was signed to solve the Broncos' pass-protection woes. Instead, he was mistake-prone, contributing to another season of disappointment up front in Denver. He still has a chance to get paid in a weak tackle market.

47) Julius Peppers, Green Bay Packers linebacker: Peppers has notched at least seven sacks in 14 of 15 NFL seasons, an unbelievable mark of consistency. Will he return to Carolina to close out a Hall of Fame career?

48) Ronald Leary, Dallas Cowboys guard: Leary was an upgrade over La'el Collins as a powerful run blocker, but it remains to be seen how he will hold up in pass protection without the benefit of All-Pro performers on either side of him.

49) DeMarcus Ware, Denver Broncos linebacker: Ware remains a dominant pass-rushing force when healthy, but he's seeing fewer and fewer snaps with each season. With Shane Ray and Shaquil Barrett showing promise opposite Von Miller, will Denver welcome Ware back for another campaign?

50) Jared Odrick, Jacksonville Jaguars defensive end: The versatile defensive lineman lived up to his mega contract in his first season with the Jaguars, but he struggled to play through an elbow injury in 2016.

51) Lawrence Timmons, Pittsburgh Steelers linebacker: Timmons' closing speed and coverage ability have slipped from his peak years, but he remains proficient enough to play all three downs.

52) Latavius Murray, Oakland Raiders running back: A younger version of LeGarrette Blount, Murray is an effective early-down power runner best kept on the sidelines during obvious passing situations.

53) Kenny Stills, Miami Dolphins wide receiver: Previously a one-dimensional deep threat with inconsistent hands, Stills emerged as a trusted red-zone weapon for Ryan Tannehill last season.

54) Brandon Carr, Dallas Cowboys cornerback: The Cowboys kept trying to replace Carr, and the veteran cornerback kept fighting off the competition. Against all odds, he started all 80 games of the five-year, \$51 million contract signed in 2012.

55) Lawrence Guy, Baltimore Ravens defensive end: Lawrence Guy is exactly the name you'd expect from a 300-pound rotational defensive lineman who can line up in multiple positions and stop the run.

56) LeGarrette Blount, New England Patriots running back: Even the Patriots didn't expect Blount to pound out 334 carries and 19 touchdowns, including the playoffs. He isn't likely to languish on the market for a month like he did a year ago.

57) Mario Williams, Miami Dolphins defensive end: If you look past the name and the inflated price tag last season, Williams was a decent part-time player. But will he be willing to take a massive pay cut for a second straight year?

58) Chance Warmack, Tennessee Titans guard: A rocky tenure in Tennessee was speckled with stretches of excellent play. Warmack still has a chance to make good on his top-10 pedigree elsewhere.

59) Kendall Wright, Tennessee Titans wide receiver: Wright hasn't been the same since catching 94 passes in his second season, but he has the short-area quickness to be a terrific slot receiver if he finds the right fit.

60) Dwight Freeney, Atlanta Falcons defensive end: He continues to create pressure in big games, no matter which contender signs him.

61) Jack Doyle, Indianapolis Colts tight end: Doyle emerged out of nowhere as a sure-handed receiving option for Andrew Luck last season. Only 26 years old with good after-the-catch skills, Doyle's upside ranks with that of any free-agent tight end.

UPDATE: Doyle is staying in Indy on a three-year deal, per NFL Network's Mike Garafolo.

62) Matt Kalil, Minnesota Vikings offensive tackle: The former top-five pick has given up a lot of sacks in his career but should be able to find a team still in love with his college tape.

63) Bradley McDougald, Tampa Bay Buccaneers safety: Once claimed off waivers, McDougald was a capable (if unspectacular) starter for the Bucs the last two years.

64) John Simon, Houston Texans linebacker: An unflashy outside linebacker who can handle a variety of roles at a high level, Simon is one of our favorite bargain free agents.

65) Cordarrelle Patterson, Minnesota Vikings wide receiver: Patterson finally gained enough trust to assume a significant role in the passing game, but his poor feel for the nuances of the position limits him to manufactured touches on shorter routes near the line of scrimmage.

66) Nick Mangold, New York Jets center: Coming off an ankle injury at age 33 won't help Mangold's market, but he should still be able to contribute as a center with great leadership ability.

67) Kelvin Beachum, Jacksonville Jaguars offensive tackle: Beachum was too often overpowered in the running game last season, but he should get another crack at a starting job with so many teams in need of experienced veterans at left tackle.

68) Andre Branch, Miami Dolphins defensive end: A washout as a second-round pick in Jacksonville, Branch salvaged his career by outplaying Mario Williams in Miami.

UPDATE: Branch is headed back to Miami on a long-term deal, per Rapoport.

69) Datone Jones, Green Bay Packers linebacker: Jones enjoyed his finest season after transitioning to outside linebacker, but he's perhaps best suited to defensive end in a 4-3 scheme.

70) JC Tretter, Green Bay Packers center: The second-best center on the market showed promise as a seven-game stand-in for starter Corey Linsley early last season. He's athletic enough to succeed on a pass-heavy team with a zone-blocking scheme.

71) Lorenzo Alexander, Buffalo Bills linebacker: How improbable was Alexander's age-33 breakout campaign? He was the oldest player ever to record his first 10-sack season. Teams have to be skeptical that he can duplicate that aberrant success outside of Rex Ryan's defense.

72) Rex Burkhead, Cincinnati Bengals running back: A bit of a factor back/slot receiver hybrid, Burkhead outplayed Giovani Bernard and Jeremy Hill in Cincinnati's backfield last season. His game is well-suited to today's offenses, where spread looks proliferate. He could be sneaky effective on the right team.

73) Brian Hoyer, Chicago Bears quarterback: Taking over for an injured Jay Cutler, Hoyer reeled off four consecutive 300-yard performances before going down with a season-ending arm injury in late October. The ideal backup, he can move an offense with more proficiency than many starters, only to have his limitations come to the forefront when he's overexposed.

UPDATE: Hoyer has agreed in principle on a deal to go to San Francisco, per Rapoport.

74) Robert Woods, Buffalo Bills wide receiver: Between injuries and a lack of big-play ability, Woods has yet to top 700 yards in a season. In a best-case scenario, he'll cash in like Mohamed Sanu did last offseason.

75) Ryan Clady, New York Jets offensive tackle: A career stuffed with surgeries has taken a toll on the former All-Pro.

76) Colin Kaepernick, San Francisco 49ers quarterback: Kaepernick will have a market, per Rapoport, but he's going to have to compete for a starting job. Although Kap showed promising flashes last season, he still struggles with accuracy, touch and field vision.

77) Mike Remmers, Carolina Panthers offensive tackle: Remmers didn't make Panthers fans forget about his performance in the Super Bowl during a so-so 2016 season.

78) Danny Woodhead, Los Angeles Chargers running back: A rare ex-Patriot to get better away from Tom Brady's loving embrace, Woodhead is 32 years old and coming off a torn ACL.

79) Ryan Fitzpatrick, New York Jets quarterback: Ranked in the top 25 of this exercise last season (whoops), Fitz makes more sense as a backup who could get hot for a few games off the bench.

80) D.J. Swearinger, Arizona Cardinals safety: The "Hard Knocks" instigator bounced around the league before the Cardinals showed what an asset he can be. He could wind up taking Tony Jefferson's job.

81) D.J. Fluker, Los Angeles Chargers guard/tackle: Fluker is a massive man with position flexibility. Although he's been a subpar pass protector, he's started 59 games over four seasons with a nasty edge in the running game.

82) Jahleel Addae, Los Angeles Chargers safety: There are more starting safety jobs open than there are quality free agents and draft picks to fill them.

83) Nolan Carroll, Philadelphia Eagles cornerback: You know him from his work as "the only solid Eagles cornerback."

84) Erik Walden, Indianapolis Colts linebacker: Mostly a letdown as a free-agent pickup for the Colts, Walden quietly recorded 11 sacks last season.

85) Captain Munneryn, Minnesota Vikings cornerback: He should still have a few seasons left as a nickel cornerback at a reasonable price.

86) Geno Smith, New York Jets quarterback: Get past all the punchlines and back-page headlines and Geno is still a 26-year-old quarterback with some quality game film to his name.

87) Brandon LaFell, Cincinnati Bengals wide receiver: LaFell exceeded expectations as the No. 2 receiver on the 2014 Patriots and 2016 Bengals, but he seems to leave his teams with a burning desire to upgrade at his spot.

UPDATE: Lafell is re-signing with the Bengals, his agents announced Wednesday.

88) Vernon Davis, Washington Redskins tight end: Signed as an afterthought in Washington, Davis proved he can still move as well as many tight ends 10 years his junior.

UPDATE: Davis re-signed with the Redskins on a three-year, \$15 million deal.

89) Christine Michael, Green Bay Packers running back: Michael's explosive running talent is obvious, but he's been undone by subpar footing, inconsistent vision and a poor mastery of the fundamentals in the passing game.

90) DeAngelo Williams, Pittsburgh Steelers running back: Williams was ideal insurance for Le'Veon Bell in Pittsburgh, but he turns 34 years old in April and managed just 3.5 yards per carry in 2016.

91) Devin Taylor, Detroit Lions defensive end: Taylor looks the part of a premier pass rusher at 6-foot-7 and 275 pounds, but he posted a paltry 4.5 sacks as a 16-game starter in Detroit last season.

92) Malcolm Smith, Oakland Raiders linebacker: Smith has been a league-average three-down linebacker in Oakland, but he left his playmaking ability at Super Bowl XLVIII.

93) Terrell McClain, Dallas Cowboys defensive tackle: An afterthought for five NFL seasons, McClain emerged as Dallas' most versatile defensive lineman, flashing big-play ability in 2016.

94) Nickell Robey-Coleman, Buffalo Bills cornerback: One of the smallest corners in the league, Robey-Coleman is limited to slot duty. He earned a contract extension prior to the 2015 season only to be benched by the Bills last November.

95) Karl Klug, Tennessee Titans defensive end: An undersized interior pass rusher, Klug would be the perfect rotational player if he weren't coming off a torn Achilles tendon.

96) Ted Ginn Jr., Carolina Panthers wide receiver: Ginn has averaged nearly 750 yards and seven touchdowns as Cam Newton's drop-prone, hit-averse deep threat the past two years. He's been a disappointment outside of Carolina throughout his 10-year career.

97) Chris Long, New England Patriots defensive end: Long managed just four sacks last season, but he led New England's defense in snaps and quarterback pressures.

98) Jairus Byrd, New Orleans Saints safety: Byrd was an injury-prone bust for a perennially beleaguered New Orleans secondary. Can he recapture solid starter status in a different system?

99) Antoine Bethea, San Francisco 49ers safety: Only one season removed from performing at a Pro Bowl level, Bethea played nearly every snap last year for the 49ers. He can still help a team even though he'll be 33 when the the season starts.

100) Darius Butler, Indianapolis Colts defensive back: The veteran cornerback increased his market value by flashing versatility in the Colts' depleted secondary last season, spending some time at safety and acquitting himself well.

101) Margus Hunt, Cincinnati Bengals defensive end: The "Hard Knocks" star from Estonia showed he can be a solid run defender in his fourth season.

# Broncos president doesn't know what team will do about Tony Romo

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
March 9, 2017

With Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo headed for the open market on Thursday, only two teams have been linked to him in a serious way. The president of one of those teams was asked about Romo on Wednesday night.

And while it's always risky to say anything more about a player currently under contract with another team than "I can't talk about a player under contract with another team," Joe Ellis didn't really say much of anything when asked about whether the Broncos will pursue quarterback Tony Romo.

"I'll leave that to [G.M.] John [Elway]," Ellis told Mike Klis of 9news.com. "I don't know what John's plans are specifically. I make a point of not asking him because then I would know and I'd have to tell you right now. . . . It will be interesting to see what we do. I'm sure John has a plan and he's ready to execute it."

This implies that the plan will consist of pursuing Romo. Indeed, if Elway had no interest in Romo, there would be no plan to execute.

Neither the Broncos nor the Texans nor anyone else can do anything until Romo officially is released. Once he is, any and all plans and non-plans can be executed.

# Chargers reportedly interested in Russell Okung

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
March 9, 2017

As agent Russell Okung prepares to try for a second straight year to find a job for tackle Russell Okung, he may have an option in the division where he played in 2016.

Mike Klis of 9news.com reports that Okung will “get strong interest” from the Chargers.

Okung can’t actually get interest now; he doesn’t have an agent, and teams can’t talk to him directly during the 52-hour negotiating period. That puts him at a disadvantage, unless teams are breaking the rules by speaking to him directly. (The Chiefs found out the hard way last year how expensive that can be.)

Arguably, the fee he’d be paying to an agent would more than justify having the ability to solicit offers now, before spots are filling by other free-agent tackles agree to terms. As it stands, the Chargers can’t actually pursue Okung until 4:00 p.m. ET on Thursday.

# Teams, agents suspect that Chargers are talking to Okung's advisor

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
March 9, 2017

The Chargers reportedly are interested in tackle Russell Okung. Since he does not have an agent, they can't talk to him until the new league year begins at 4:00 p.m. ET on Thursday.

Some agents and teams suspect (they don't know, but they suspect) that the Chargers are communicating with Okung's advisor, former NFLPA-certified agent Jimmy Halsell. Because Halsell isn't currently certified by the union, however, teams can't talk to him on Okung's behalf before the new league year opens.

Agents who suspect it is happening are upset because this circumvention of the rules makes it easier for players to stop using agents. Teams who suspect it is happening are upset because they are following the rules by not contacting the Chargers or Halsell.

Again, it's not known whether the Chargers have contacted Halsell, and Halsell technically wouldn't be doing anything wrong by talking to the Chargers. It's the Chargers who would be violating the tampering rules, if the communications are happening.

# What's next for Tony Romo?

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
March 9, 2017

The Cowboys tried to finagle a trade for quarterback Tony Romo, via a string of coy and at times inconsistent comments and leaks from the team (recently, they got at least one media member to go with the idea that they're in no hurry to resolve the situation). Ultimately, a trade didn't work out, and the Cowboys did what they should have done all along, given the unique circumstances of the case.

The circumstances of the case remain unique as Romo becomes a free agent for the first time since he signed with the Cowboys as an undrafted free agent nearly 14 years ago. He had been due to make \$14 million this year, but any team that signs him will want protections against Romo getting injured again. And Tony is sufficiently reasonable to recognize the fairness of that approach.

The Broncos and Texans have emerged as the primary destinations, in the estimation of the media. Romo, per a source with knowledge of the situation, will weigh all options. And that could (key word "could") include some teams that have yet to be publicly identified.

It has been believed that Romo would agree to avoid certain of those options in exchange for the team's decision to cut him loose early in the league year. Under the designation of the transaction, the Cowboys will realize no benefit from cutting Romo until June 1. They could have dragged this out at least until the start of the offseason program, if they had wanted to continue to try to leverage a trade.

The Texans have not yet said anything about wanting, or not wanting, Romo. After he conceded the starting job to Dak Prescott during a November press conference, John McClain of the Houston Chronicle said on PFT Live that the Texans would not pursue Romo. If they do, they'll have to navigate the second year of Brock Osweiler's contract, which pays out \$16 million this year.

The Broncos gradually have emerged as a viable destination for Romo, but they'll surely want to proceed on their own terms. They drove a hard bargain last year with Colin Kaepernick, and ultimately didn't sign him. This year, the dilemma arises from the desire to win now with Romo versus the importance of building for the future with Paxton Lynch or Trevor Siemian.

# Colorado's Pro Day attracts notice of Broncos -- and every other NFL team

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 9, 2017

Never have the Broncos failed to have a substantial presence at the University of Colorado's annual Pro Day. With Boulder in their backyard, the Broncos typically have a robust complement of personnel evaluators on hand; that was the case once again Wednesday afternoon.

But in the wake of a revival season that saw CU sprint to the Pac-12 North title, the secret of the Buffaloes' program -- and the quality within it -- is out. The Broncos were joined by representatives of every other NFL team, marking the first time since 1995 that all clubs were present.

Perhaps no statistic better demonstrates that CU's "rise is real" than that; it is evidence of the upgraded quality of talent that helped the Buffs return to national relevance.

"I didn't even know that stat, but, dang," said cornerback Chidobe Awuzie.

"You get the individual accolades along the way when you're losing, but when you really start winning, that's when everybody gets to eat, and everybody gets to succeed, so I feel like us going to that bowl game, having a 10-win season -- it meant a lot of that team, and also for a lot of our futures."

Awuzie turned heads with a 4.43-second 40-yard dash that ranked eighth among 33 cornerbacks to run the 40 in Indianapolis. He also ranked among the top 10 cornerbacks in the broad jump, three-cone drill and the short shuttle.

But he came up short in just one statistic: the vertical jump. That was the only drill he chose to do Wednesday, and he improved from 34.5 inches to 39.5 inches. That would have been the second-best vertical jump among all cornerbacks at the Combine -- only trailing CU teammate Ahkello Witherspoon's 40.5-inch leap.

"I got five more inches on my vert, so something was working," Awuzie said.

Like Awuzie, Witherspoon and safety Tedric Thompson bypassed every timing and strength drill other than the vertical jump, but took part in all of the position drills.

"Coaches wanted to see hip turns and breaks -- simple DB stuff," Awuzie said. "I think we answered those questions."

They didn't need the exposure. Neither did quarterback Sefo Liufau, who also took part at the Combine.

But some players truly needed the spotlight that Wednesday's workout brought -- perhaps none more than outside linebacker Jimmie Gilbert.

With 11 sacks last year, Gilbert ranked 15th in the nation and second in the Pac-12 in that category, and only two players in FCS accounted for more yards lost via sacks than Gilbert, whose takedowns led to 106 yards in losses for opposing quarterbacks.

But Gilbert doesn't fit the traditional size of an edge rusher; he played last season at around 215 pounds. His season did enough to earn him an invitation to January's East-West Shrine Game in St. Petersburg, Fla., but he was not among the 330 players invited to last week's Scouting Combine.

Gilbert had a strong day, posting a 37-inch vertical jump, a 10-foot broad jump and a 40-yard dash that was timed at 4.64 seconds.

"I could have done better -- and I should have," Gilbert said.

But the biggest thing he did was show that he could maintain his speed with added bulk; at 234 pounds, he's nearly 20 pounds heavier than he was last season.

"I just wanted to show that I can put on the weight, and hopefully [teams] take that into consideration," Gilbert said. "Before draft day, my goal is to be 240 [to] 245 [pounds]."

Gilbert's work opened some eyes -- which shows the value of Pro Days around the country. The Combine isn't the be-all, end-all, but without it, Pro Day was everything for Gilbert, eight of his CU teammates who worked out Wednesday and a host of players from schools around the state like Adams State, CSU-Pueblo and the Colorado School of Mines, who took the field after CU's players completed their work.

"We were trying to make the most of what we could today and put it all on the line," Gilbert said.

And for the first time in a generation, they did so knowing that every NFL team was on hand.

# 'Jack-of-all-trades' Awuzie looking for place in NFL

By Aric DiLalla  
DenverBroncos.com  
March 9, 2017

Chidobe Awuzie knew John Ross was fast.

The two met in the PAC-12 title game in December, where the former, a Colorado defensive back, lined up at times against the Washington wide receiver.

So, yes, Awuzie knew Ross has speed. He “sensed it on him,” he said at the NFL Combine.

He just didn’t quite know the 5-foot-11 wide receiver had 4.22-second 40-yard dash speed.

That’s the time Ross posted over the weekend at the Combine, where scouts and media members buzzed about his straight-line speed.

Ross’ speed, though, didn’t intimidate Awuzie in December, and it didn’t intimidate him at the Combine. The projected Day-2 draft pick said he was happy with the way Colorado’s defensive backs kept Ross in front of them in the 41-10 Washington win.

“Oh, [I’m] never scared,” Awuzie said. “I’m always confident. And when I’m on the field that’s when I’m at home, I’m comfortable. I like to compete. I like to challenge people.”

Awuzie is currently challenging NFL executives as they search for the position best-suited for the 6-foot, 190-pound defensive back.

That same challenge met Broncos All-Pro cornerback Chris Harris Jr. when he came out of Kansas in 2011. Though Harris excelled with the Jayhawks, he was moved to safety for a period of time. Thus, just like Awuzie, questions arose about where he would play in the NFL. Since his rookie season, however, Harris has been among the top corners and has dominated on both the outside and in the slot.

Though Awuzie has never met Harris, he has watched film on the 5-foot-10 cornerback. And he sees plenty of similarities between him and one of the Broncos' star corner.

"Definitely as a shorter player who can play in the slot or at corner, Chris Harris is definitely one of the best," Awuzie said. "Him, [Tyrann] Mathieu, Brent Grimes, they can slide in and are very versatile. The game I feel has changed like that in the way that teams are spreading it out and you need more corners who can do that."

With the Buffaloes, Awuzie played all over the field. He rotated between cornerback, nickel and both safety slots, which meant he lined up in the box at times. His fluid backpedal allowed him to excel in man coverage, while his closing burst made him a weapon as a slot blitzer, per NFL.com.

That versatility “speaks to my football knowledge,” Awuzie said, and he believes his instincts will allow him to succeed no matter where NFL teams choose to play him.

"I'm just a ballplayer," Awuzie said. "I always have the mentality of 'See ball, get ball.' No matter where I'm lined up. [If] it's sacking the quarterback, [then] get the ball. I'm going to tackle him. If the ball's in the air, I'm going to tackle him on a play. And that's the way my mentality is."

In his final season with the Buffs, Awuzie made that mentality a reality. He picked off a pass, deflected 11 more, forced two fumbles and recorded four sacks as Colorado ripped off a 10-win season. That campaign brought his two-year sack total to seven and his interception total to three.

Awuzie will be back in Boulder on Wednesday for his pro day, where he'll join a handful of Buffs that includes quarterback Sefo Liufau and fellow defensive backfield member Ahkello Witherspoon.

Before the draft arrives in late April, it will be his final formal chance to answer teams' questions about where he'll fit when he transitions to the next level.

"Teams really don't know where to put me at right now and that's great for me, because I don't want to be limited," Awuzie said. "I'm just a ballplayer."

"You put me on the field anywhere I'm going to make plays. That's been great that I can kind of be a jack-of-all-trades for teams."

That's what he set out to prove at the Combine. And while the NFL world reacted to Ross' 40 time, Awuzie's performance in the dash garnered far less attention over the weekend. But to NFL Network's Mike Mayock and Daniel Jeremiah, his 4.43 signaled that Awuzie could step in and be an instant starter at nickel.

In the midst of Awuzie's second attempt, Jeremiah recounted meeting with the cornerback a week earlier. When he told the cornerback about his concerns regarding his deep speed, Awuzie's legs started to shake.

Awuzie asked Jeremiah what he thought he would run in the 40, to which Jeremiah replied that he expected the Colorado defensive back to post a 4.55.

Jeremiah continued his story.

"He just shook his head and said, 'I'm not running a 4.55.'"

Awuzie wasn't wrong, and he hopes that streak continues.