

Broncos sign OT Menelik Watson to three-year contract

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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Minutes after he introduced Ron Leary as Denver's new free-agency prize Friday afternoon, Broncos general manager John Elway headed back upstairs at the team's headquarters to finalize another addition to his offensive line. He was close, but not quite ready to show off his latest 300-pound catch.

Two and a half hours later, the general manager returned, still wearing a grin of eagerness and excitement as he introduced Menelik Watson, a 6-foot-5, 315-pound offensive tackle who signed a three-year contract with the Broncos. The Manchester, England native was a second-round pick by the Raiders (No. 42) in the 2013 draft and spent the last four seasons with the Broncos' division rival.

"He's played left and right tackle — mostly right tackle — but we'll see where he fits," Elway said of Watson. "But we're thrilled Menelik has decided to come to Denver. As you can tell, a very big and physical player that, again, is going to bring that mentality. Really excited about him. We had our eyes on Menelik when we played him this (past) year."

Staying in the division affords familiarity — for both sides — but the selling point for Watson was not just the on-field opportunity, but also the Broncos' facility. Throughout his NFL career Watson has dealt with a string of injuries, most recently a calf strain suffered last season.

Previously, a combination of foot and ankle injuries sidelined him for the last four weeks of the 2014 season and a torn Achilles tendon cost him the entire 2015 season.

"That is why I'm here," said Watson, still donning Oakland colors with a gray sweatsuit and black beanie. "We've got the best strength staff in the world. I've talked diligently with those guys. ... For me, it wasn't really about chasing a contract. It was about chasing the right situation. It's about going to the situation that's going to elongate my career."

In Oakland, Watson relied on Joe Gomes, the Raiders' head strength-and-conditioning coach who was recommended to coach Jack Del Rio by Broncos strength-and-conditioning coach Luke Richesson.

"The stuff (Gomes) was doing in Oakland was working wonders, so I went to the Godfather (Richesson), who's here," Watson said. "I just believed he's got a great plan."

If he can stay healthy, Watson, 28, fills another need and priority for Elway as he works to revamp the offensive line. Leary, a former Cowboy who ranked as the 14th-best run-blocking guard by Pro Football Focus, was the first piece. Watson was the second, arriving a day after veteran left tackle Russell Okung joined the Chargers.

"The guys I'm in the trenches with, I'm riding with," Watson said. "They know if they're throwing a punch, I'm throwing a punch. Whatever they get into, I'm getting into. I think the biggest thing is we all got to mesh and we all have to trust each other. That's what we had in Oakland and I think that's why we were so successful. Everybody trusted each other."

Watson's place along the Broncos' line remains to be seen as coordinator Mike McCoy finalizes his offense and as the Broncos make additional personnel decisions.

The Broncos signed right tackle Donald Stephenson to a three-year contract last year, but he fell in and out of the starting lineup because of injuries and performance. His \$4 million salary becomes fully guaranteed Monday if he's still on the roster. If the Broncos decide to release him, they would reap \$3 million salary-cap savings.

The good news for the Broncos: Watson said he'll play anywhere that he is needed.

"If they need me to play inside, I'll play inside," he said. "If they need me to play (defensive back), I'll go out there and backpedal. I just love to play football."

A former soccer player turned basketball player at Marist College (2009-10), Watson traded in sneakers for cleats six years ago. He tried American football for the first time at Saddleback College, a junior college in Mission Viejo, Calif. It was there that he was shown how to strap on pads and it was there that he learned from current Bears guard Kyle Long.

"He was the left tackle," Watson said of Long. "He was the one who convinced me to go there and I remember walking in the first day, just confused. He was like, 'Hey, come on offense tomorrow. It's easier.' I was like, 'all right,' so I went to the head coach and said, 'Coach, can I try offense?' He said, 'Yeah, sure.' So I went over there and Kyle, he told me, 'Hey, man, quarterback's the basket. Don't let them get the basket.'"

Watson learned to pass protect before he could run block, creating some confusion in his early games. But, despite his late introduction to football, he shot up the ranks to become one of the top junior college prospects in the nation. After fielding scholarship offers from multiple major programs, he landed at Florida State.

Labeled an NFL veteran, Watson's overall football experience is limited and unique, honed by playing against the likes of linebackers Khalil Mack and Bruce Irvin in Oakland. Soon it will be tailored furthered by working daily against the Broncos' defense, an opportunity he said is "everything."

"I can't really put it into words, honestly," he said. "It's a fresh start. It's everything to me. It's everything to my family. It's been a crazy four years for me, ups and downs. I've had some highs and I've had some lows. It's just a fresh start."

Ronald Leary won't recruit Tony Romo to Broncos, but will bring physicality to OL

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

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It took a few questions, but new Broncos guard Ronald Leary was ready when asked to talk about the topic that's creating all the buzz in Denver: where will Tony Romo play next? Could the former Cowboy play a role in bringing his former teammate to Denver to play quarterback?

"Nah, I'm definitely not a recruiter. I'm not getting caught up in that at all," said Leary at a news conference Friday at Dove Valley. "Tony's a great guy. He was a great teammate with me in Dallas, but I'm in Denver now. We have two great young quarterbacks in Trevor (Siemian) and Paxton (Lynch). I watched them last year, they're getting better. They're young and have bright futures."

Romo has yet to be released by the Cowboys.

Leary, who signed a four-year, \$36 million contract, spent the past five seasons in Dallas protecting Romo and paving the way for two different running backs to win the rushing title. He had high praise for Romo's skills but remained diplomatic on where Romo will play next.

"I haven't talked to Tony personally so I'm not sure how he's feeling, but I definitely feel like he has some more game in him," Leary, 27, said. "He's a great quarterback, one of the best to ever do it. I love playing with him and have a lot of respect for him and wish the best for him."

While it doesn't appear Leary will directly impact whether Romo joins the Broncos, what the Broncos are expecting is that he will provide a physical veteran presence to an offensive line in desperate need of both.

Leary immediately becomes the oldest and possibly best offensive lineman on the Broncos. He'll be expected to solidify the interior of Denver's offensive line along with Matt Paradis at center and Max Garcia at the other guard spot.

Leary almost didn't go this route. In high school, he was a basketball star until his junior year when coaches handed him pads and told him to get to work.

"I'm 6-3, 320 pounds. I wasn't going to be the next Michael Jordan," Leary said, laughing. "I put my hand in the dirt and I'm blessed it's been working for me."

He went to college at Memphis but his late introduction to football and a knee condition caused him to go undrafted. There were questions on how long he'd last in the NFL but he worked his way from the practice squad to a huge contract.

In Dallas, Leary was a part of a heavy zone blocking scheme. He believes he can play in power and zone schemes, though. His run blocking and large frame supports that claim.

“I take more enjoyment blocking for the run. Run blocking is all about attitude,” Leary said. “It’s big guy on big guy, who is going to come out hard, who is going to hit him first in the mouth. I’m moving forward, he’s moving forward. I love that part of the game.”

Leary said joining a team with one of the most dominant defenses in the NFL played a big role in him signing in Denver. He’s not a big “rah-rah” guy, but he believes he can help get teammates together to help form a bond on the offensive side of the ball.

“Ronald is the type of player we’re looking for with the mentality of the offensive line – physical and tough,” Broncos general manager John Elway said. “That was one of our goals and we got that in Ronald.”

Leary already met with Garcia and Paradis Thursday at Dove Valley for introductions and they spoke briefly about how they don’t want the offensive line to be known as the weakness of the team anymore.

Leary, coming from one of the best offensive lines in the NFL, knows what it takes to be great.

“All the guys got to be on the same page. Once everyone has it made up on their mind that we’re going to be bullies on the field, it makes it a lot easier,” Leary said, who didn’t allow a sack in 13 games (12 starts) last season.

Leary is expected to replace Michael Schofield as a starter. It’s not clear yet whether Leary will play at right guard or assume his normal left guard position, which is where Garcia has primarily played. Both Leary and Garcia said they’d be willing to play either spot.

DL Sylvester Williams agrees to 3-year deal with Titans, per reports

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The former Broncos nose tackle and 2013 first-round draft pick agreed to a three-year contract with the Tennessee Titans, ESPN and Fox reported Friday evening.

The Broncos declined to exercise the fifth-year option on Williams' contract last year, indicating he would hit free agency when his rookie deal expired. At the NFL combine last week, Broncos general manager John Elway confirmed as much.

"We still have interest in trying to get Sylvester back," Elway said then. "But he wants to see the market. We've had conversations with his agent. It sounds like that they want to hit the market and find what is out there. He'll hit it and we'll see what happens."

When Terrance Knighton left as a free agent and the Broncos switched to the 3-4 scheme in 2015, Williams was elevated to starting nose tackle. Over the last two seasons, while serving as the center anchor on the Broncos' line, Williams totaled 54 total tackles (four for loss), four sacks and five quarterback hits.

Williams fills a void for the Titans, who released veteran Al Woods on Wednesday and have been in need of a true nose tackle. Last season, Tennessee's defense ranked 20th in total yards allowed (357.5 per game) but second in rushing yards (88.3 per game).

The Broncos signed free agents Ron Leary and Menelik Watson to boost their offensive line, but have been on the hunt for help on the defensive line. Although Williams wasn't expected to return to Denver, his defection to Tennessee pares the market of available defensive linemen.

Broncos add Menelik Watson to Ron Leary-led offensive line

By Mike Klis

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As the Denver Broncos were introducing their new offensive guard in one room, their soon-to-be new offensive tackle was touring other rooms.

Ronald Leary and Menelik Watson brought considerably more hope of better play to the Broncos' offensive line room Friday.

Leary, a three-year starting left guard for the Dallas Cowboys before he became free agent Thursday, was introduced to the Denver media Friday afternoon after signing a four-year, \$35 million contract that was agreed to on Wednesday during the negotiating period.

Watson, an oft-injured starting right tackle for the AFC West Division-rival Oakland Raiders, was visiting the Broncos somewhere inside their headquarters Friday as Leary was answering questions.

About 45 minutes after Leary finished his last interview, the Broncos signed Watson to a three-year contract.

Leary was asked the impression the rest of the league has from the outside looking in on the Broncos during an interview with 9NEWS.

"As a championship contender every year," Leary said. "You see that the Broncos are playing on Thursday night, you want to watch the Broncos play on Thursday night. You know they're going to come with it every time they touch the field.

"They've got an offense they're trying to build on, they've got some pieces they're trying to put together. And you can't say enough about their defense. They have one of the best defenses that you'll see in football right now."

And no, Leary said he hasn't talked to former teammate Tony Romo.

"I'm not a recruiter," he said.

The Broncos have now addressed two holes in their offensive line, although they took a backwards approach to it. Their needs were at left tackle and right guard. They signed a right tackle (Watson) and left guard (Leary).

Most likely, Max Garcia will switch from left guard to right, and Donald Stephenson will switch from right tackle to left.

Stephenson has a \$4 million salary option that becomes guaranteed against injury on Monday. The Broncos are still shopping for another left tackle, defensive end and defensive tackle.

Sylvester Williams grateful to Broncos as he joins Tennessee Titans

By Mike Klis

9News

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Sylvester Williams was more mature than most NFL players, perhaps because he lived the common working man's life before he became serious about football.

Losses were rare during Williams' tenure in Denver -- the Broncos averaged 11.5 wins a season and made two Super Bowl appearances in his four seasons -- but he held himself accountable in good times and bad.

Williams leaves the Broncos appreciative but with a heavy heart.

The defensive tackle reached an agreement Friday night on a three-year contract with the Tennessee Titans.

"Those four years in Denver meant everything to me," Williams said in a phone interview. "(John) Elway and Kubes (Gary Kubiak) and Bill (Kollar), everything they did for me, it meant so much.

"And then to be able to win and win a ring in the Mile High City, and be part of that legacy of one of the better defenses of all time is something I'll never forget for the rest of my life. And the fans there were so supportive."

The Broncos did try to re-sign Williams to a multiyear deal in recent days, but their money must have been considerable less than what he got from Tennessee. Williams said he offered to come back on a one-year deal but it didn't work out.

Why the Titans?

"They showed a lot of interest in me and it's close to home, close to my family," said Williams, a native of Jefferson City, Mo. "The team has a lot of positive energy. It's on the way up. You've got to go where it feels best."

The Broncos' first-round draft pick, No. 28 overall, in 2013, Williams knew there was a good chance 2016 would be his final season in Denver when last May the team declined to exercise his \$6.757 option for the 2017 season.

"It was heartbreaking because I wanted to be a Denver Bronco for a long time," he said. "That organization speaks for itself. It's one of the best in the business. Knowing it might be my last year was tough but I wanted to make sure to go out with a bang and win another Super Bowl. We weren't able to do that and that left a bad taste in my mouth. But I still thank them. When they drafted me in 2013 they changed my life forever. And winning that ring is something nobody can ever take from me."

An inspiring story of perseverance, Williams worked at Walmart and a radiator factory after high school before he decided to play football at Coffeyville (Kan.) Community College. He then transferred to North Carolina, where he played well enough for the Broncos to make him their first-round selection.

He didn't get his first start until the 13th game of his rookie season, but once there he became a mainstay in the Broncos' defensive front. He started in two Super Bowls, including Super Bowl 50, when the great Denver defense capped its dominating season that drew comparisons to the 2000 Baltimore Ravens.

He had 6.0 sacks and 94 tackles in his four seasons in Denver. His favorite play?

"I'd have to say my first NFL sack on Phil Rivers would probably be my fave," he said referring to a December 12 game in his rookie 2013 season. "It was my welcome to the NFL moment and it felt so good."

Broncos keep focus on OL in free agency, add Menelik Watson

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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The Denver Broncos continued their big-guy approach in free agency Friday as Menelik Watson became the second offensive linemen to come to terms with the Broncos in the first two days of free agency.

The Broncos, intent on adding players on both the offensive and defensive lines, also pursued defensive end Calais Campbell (he signed in Jacksonville) and chased nose tackle candidates Earl Mitchell and Chris Baker as well. Mitchell, who had been released by the Miami Dolphins, signed with the San Francisco 49ers before free agency opened, and Baker signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Friday.

Watson played in 10 games and started five for the Oakland Raiders this past season.

Terms: 3 years, \$18.3 million.

Top 150 ranking: No. 90.

Grade: If he's healthy and can stay in the lineup, this could be a solid B. Watson won't turn 29 until December, so he fits in the age-value profile Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway likes in a potential free-agent signing. Guard Ronald Leary was the first unrestricted free agent to sign with the Broncos in free agency's opening hours. The Broncos have now added two potential new starters up front.

What it means: It could mean the Broncos are working toward a decision on Donald Stephenson. Watson is far more likely to play right tackle for the Broncos because that's likely a far more natural position -- he has struggled with speed rushers in pass protection at times when he has played on the left side. Stephenson, who started at right tackle last season for the Broncos has a clause in his contract that guarantees his \$4 million base salary for 2017 if he's on the roster on Monday. Stephenson did not play as the Broncos had hoped last season -- he tied with Russell Okung for the team lead in penalties -- and Elway wouldn't rule out cutting Stephenson last week at the combine. It also means the Broncos have added players from the No. 2 rushing team in the league this past season (the Cowboys) and the No. 6 rushing team in the league in the Raiders.

What's the risk: Watson has never played more than 12 games in a season because of a variety of injuries, including a groin injury this past season, and missed the 2015 season with a ruptured Achilles tendon. He's had a tough road in that regard, and the Broncos will certainly need some additional insurance at the position even with Michael Schofield on the roster if they choose to release Stephenson rather than guarantee his base salary.

Ronald Leary has on-field 'demeanor' the Broncos sought

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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The traditional arrival comments for any newly minted free agent are routinely spiced with the sunshine and rainbows of happy-to-be-here missives.

But mixed into Ronald Leary's very happy arrival to the Denver Broncos on Friday were some words that made it abundantly clear why he was a priority target for the Broncos when the market officially opened Thursday afternoon.

The Broncos believe they left a Super Bowl opportunity on the table in 2016 largely because, week after week, the offense couldn't run the ball or protect the quarterback well enough. And they went in search of some toughness, some proven performance, and an "it" factor on the offensive line.

In short, Leary was plenty mild-mannered in a suit jacket Friday, a picture of calm and professionalism, but when asked about how he approaches things as a run-blocker, he simply offered music to Broncos vice president John Elway's ears.

"Oh, I definitely take more enjoyment blocking for the run," Leary said. "Run blocking is all about attitude. It's big guy on big guy, you know, who's going to come out harder and hit who first in the mouth. ... I love that part of the game. I love pass blocking too. I love the game of football."

Since the Broncos finished 27th in the league in rushing last season, 28th in yards per carry and 20th in rushing touchdowns, and didn't have a 1,000-yard rusher for the fourth consecutive season, they want and need Leary to bring plenty of what he showed as the Dallas Cowboys' left guard last season.

The Cowboys were second in the league in rushing and Ezekiel Elliott was the league's rushing champion.

"Once everybody had made up in their mind that we're going to be bullies on the field, then that makes it a lot easier," Leary said. "If everybody thinks like that, has that mentality ... then you say, 'That looks fun, knocking people around.' ... It just trickles down."

The Broncos, as they had planned, largely stayed out of the frenzy of the opening day of free agency this year. But they targeted two players in particular for their first-day attention: Leary and defensive tackle Calais Campbell, a Denver native.

The Broncos got close on Campbell, who decided to sign with the Jacksonville Jaguars, but landed Leary.

"He's the type of player we're looking for ... physical and tough and plays with the demeanor that makes us tough in the offensive line," Elway said. "That was one of our goals."

Leary said he would be open to playing either left or right guard for the Broncos. He met with guard Max Garcia and center Matt Paradis on Friday during his time at the Broncos' complex.

At least initially, the Broncos will likely play Leary on the left side and Garcia on the right, with Paradis at center. Leary's presence on the left side would potentially help the transition if the Broncos use an early-round draft pick on a left tackle with the expectation of starting a rookie at the position.

Barnwell grades the big free-agent deals

By Bill Barnwell

ESPN.com

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Money is flying all over the place in free agency. Who deserves high marks, and who will come to regret their decisions? Let's break down each big deal.

Friday, March 10

DL Jabaal Sheard, Colts

Grade: B+

The Patriots got solid production out of their two years with Sheard, although the defensive lineman ceded snaps to Trey Flowers as the 2016 season went along. On 636 pass rushes over the past two seasons, Sheard generated 13 sacks and 22 quarterback knockdowns. Over that same time frame, Packers LB Nick Perry had 14.5 sacks and 20 knockdowns on 543 pass rushes for the Packers. Perry has been more productive, but he is earning \$60 million over five years. Sheard is getting less than half that - \$25.5 million and \$12.8 million in guarantees -- on his new three-year deal with the Colts. I'd prefer to take a shot on Sheard breaking out given more playing time than to pay Perry as a premium pass-rusher.

OT Mike Remmers, Vikings

Grade: C-

The Panthers gave a staggering contract to former Vikings left tackle Matt Kalil, so Minnesota apparently decided to respond in kind by signing a middling tackle away from Carolina. Remmers was badly overmatched in pass protection at times during his stint protecting Cam Newton, but he's a solid run-blocker and should help clear paths for whomever replaces Adrian Peterson in the Minnesota backfield. Since the Vikings have the immobile Sam Bradford at quarterback, though, I'd want a better pass protector for five years and \$30 million. Remmers will team with Riley Reiff (who got a five-year deal worth up to \$58.75 million) to try to keep Bradford afloat in 2017.

WR Terrelle Pryor, Washington

Grade: B+

Cleveland's decision to avoid slapping the franchise tag on Pryor appears to be a wise one, but Browns fans who had just fallen in love with their latest offensive weapon will be disappointed to see Pryor leave after one year of excellent play at wideout in Ohio. The Browns will replace Pryor with Kenny Britt, while Pryor will join Washington and work with injured 2016 first-rounder Josh Doctson to replace the departed DeSean Jackson and Pierre Garcon.

The market for Pryor never materialized, as teams seemed hesitant to commit significant resources over multiple years to a player with just one year of meaningful professional experience at a position. (If Pryor had only been a quarterback!) Instead, despite the vacuum of chaos enveloping the Washington

front office in the absence of deposed general manager Scot McCloughan, the Redskins actually pieced together a reasonably solid deal for a starting wideout, getting Pryor on a one-year contract worth up to \$8 million.

CB Prince Amukamara, Bears

Grade: A

The best free-agent moves involve teams getting useful players on short-term deals for less than market value. That's what the Bears have done in acquiring Amukamara, who appeared to rebuild his value and justify a long-term deal during a solid year with the Jaguars. Instead, when Amukamara's market failed to materialize, the Bears were able to fill a major hole at cornerback temporarily and bring in the former Giants draftee on a one-year deal at \$7 million, well below the \$10+ million rate guys like Dre Kirkpatrick were receiving on long-term contracts. Amukamara's injury history might have given some teams pause, but the Bears aren't making a multi-year commitment, and Amukamara will be a huge upgrade on Tracy Porter or Kyle Fuller at cornerback.

ILB Lawrence Timmons, Dolphins

Grade: C

It was unlikely that Timmons would return to the Steelers because of the hometown premium, the weird economic problem where players are more likely to take pay cuts from other organizations than they are from their own. Timmons made \$8.8 million as part of his staggering \$15.1 million cap hit with the Steelers in the final year of his oft-restructured deal, and it was tough to imagine Pittsburgh matching that annual salary while managing raises for Antonio Brown and Le'Veon Bell.

So, Timmons instead finds his way to Miami, which has struck out repeatedly in trying to sign linebackers in free agency and just gave Kiko Alonso a first-round tender out of the fear that somebody would grab him for a second-round pick with a large contract. (A second-round pick for Alonso, if I'm not being clear, would be an excellent deal for the pick-strapped Dolphins.) With Alonso likely moving to the weakside, Timmons will move to a 4-3 for the first time in his professional career and play middle linebacker behind Ndamukong Suh.

It's hardly out of the question Timmons will be worth his deal, especially in the first year. I'd be worried about committing to a second season, as the Dolphins have done by guaranteeing \$11 million of Timmons' \$12 million total, for an inside linebacker who will be in his age-32 season in 2018. Timmons will be a much-needed upgrade on Jelani Jenkins in Miami's nickel packages, but Timmons himself was taken advantage of at times by teams who exploited his declining foot speed. The Dolphins upgraded, but again, there's the question of whether they've paid a premium at a spot in their lineup where that wasn't necessary.

G Larry Warford, Saints

Grade: B

The Saints basically punted right guard last year, cutting longtime guard Jahri Evans and only re-signing him once the Seahawks released him from their camp. Evans held up well and stayed healthy for all 16 games, but it's no surprise the Saints tried to upgrade on a player who will turn 34 this August.

Enter Warford, who excelled as a rookie with the Lions before delivering solid-if-unspectacular play over his three ensuing seasons in Detroit. The Lions didn't ask him to hold up for very long in pass protection under Jim Bob Cooter, with Matthew Stafford getting the ball out in 2.41 seconds last year. Drew Brees is even faster: The future Hall of Famer averaged just 2.32 seconds before releasing his passes in 2016. Teams try to counteract that by getting pressure on Brees up the middle, which makes great pass protection from guards wildly important in Sean Payton's scheme. Warford also has the mobility to get upfield on screens, which is a must in New Orleans.

The Saints appear to have struck a decent price, giving Warford \$34 million over four years with \$17 million in guarantees. We'll have to see the specific structure of the deal, which is always an adventure with the Saints, and you might argue that the Saints should have committed more of their cap space toward upgrading their perpetually dismal defense. All things considered, though, this is a very reasonable signing at an important position.

OLB John Simon, Colts

Grade: B+

Some of it must have come from playing alongside J.J. Watt from 2014-15, but Simon was quietly a useful rotation pass-rusher on the edge for the Texans. He had 8.5 sacks and 21 quarterback knockdowns in the past two seasons while playing just more than 56 percent of Houston's defensive snaps. There's plenty of upside there, given that Simon is solid against the run and won't turn 27 until October. Ironically, this is the exact sort of player former Colts general manager Ryan Grigson took chances on in free agency early during the Andrew Luck era, but the difference here is price. While Grigson paid players like Ricky Jean-Francois and Greg Toler like they were already valuable starters, new general manager Chris Ballard picked up Simon for just \$13.5 million over three years with \$5.5 million guaranteed.

DE Chris Baker, Buccaneers

Grade: B+

The Bucs made a nice low-cost move by luring Baker away from Washington, where he had quietly become a disruptive defensive end in the team's base 3-4 alignment. Baker has racked up 9.5 sacks, 27 knockdowns and 11 tackles for loss against the run over the past two years. Washington has otherwise been weak along the line of scrimmage, so it was a surprise to see the team let its best defensive lineman leave for what amounted to a pittance: Baker's deal with Tampa is for three years and \$15.8 million with \$9 million guaranteed.

DT Stacy McGee, Washington

Grade: B

Washington will help replace Baker up front by adding the 27-year-old McGee, who stole a starting job up front in Oakland from free-agent addition Dan Williams and was the Raiders' best interior lineman over the past couple of seasons. The Raiders allowed 3.9 yards per carry with McGee on the field over the past two years and 4.5 yards per attempt with him on the bench or unavailable. Injuries are the big concern, as McGee missed five games in 2014 and started nine games last season. As his role expands, McGee will need to stay on the field to live up to his five-year deal worth up to \$25 million. If he can, Washington is likely to be happy with its 310-pound addition.

G Ronald Leary, Broncos

Grade: B

Leary lost his job in Dallas in 2015 through no fault of his own, when he went down early in the season with a groin injury and the Cowboys handed his spot to La'el Collins. Leary reversed the feat in 2016, taking over for Collins after the second-year player went down with a turf toe injury in September. Leary had played well as a starter in 2014 and kept it up last year, but the Cowboys were always going to go with the far cheaper Collins and allow Leary to leave.

The Broncos are likely happy they signed Leary early in the free-agent period. Given that Kevin Zeitler reset the guard market shortly thereafter at five years and \$60 million with \$31.5 million guaranteed, the Broncos got a good deal when they gave Leary \$20 million guaranteed as part of a four-year, \$35 million deal. They naturally have to be concerned that Leary's play will dip now that he's playing along a middling offensive line instead of between Tyron Smith and Travis Frederick, but given how awful the Broncos looked up front last year, it's a risk they have to take.

WR Pierre Garcon, 49ers

Grade: C+

Garcon has outperformed expectations before. Washington paid what was considered to be an exorbitant sum at the time in giving Garcon five years and \$42.5 million with \$20.5 million guaranteed before the 2012 season. Garcon wasn't always productive, but he mostly stayed healthy and played out the entire five-year deal. That almost never happens with second contracts. He averaged 75 catches for 910 yards over that time span, which is solid second-receiver stuff.

Former Washington offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan is bringing a number of his old players along with him to San Francisco, and while he'd like to add Kirk Cousins to that list, Garcon is the most impactful player of the bunch. His new deal is remarkably similar to his old one; the 49ers are giving Garcon five years and \$47.5 million with \$20 million guaranteed.

The 49ers probably are paying a premium for familiarity with Garcon and his run at the end of the season; Garcon reportedly requested a trade earlier in the 2016 season, which should suggest where he felt he stood on Washington's depth chart. He also turns 31 in August, so the 49ers will likely be paying for his decline years. In reality, though, this is more likely to be a two-year, \$23 million deal or a three-year, \$29 million deal than it is the full five-year pact, which is reasonable enough. The only odd thing is seeing the 49ers keep Garcon's cap hit at \$6.4 million this year before it escalates to an average of \$10.3 million over the remainder of the deal. If anything, it seems smarter to pay Garcon now, when the team is flush with cap room and cash.

S Reshad Jones, Dolphins

Grade: D+

You can understand why the Dolphins would want to re-sign their 29-year-old safety as he enters the final year of his second contract. Jones has made it to only one Pro Bowl, but he's an effective box safety with the range to create interceptions and the speed to pick up a couple of sacks per year. At the same time, here are Miami's numbers on pass defense with and without Jones on the field last year, given that Jones missed 10 games with a torn rotator cuff:

Miami With Jones, Miami Without Jones (2016)

SPLIT	CMP	ATT	CMP%	YDS	Y/ATT	TD	INT	PSRT	QBR
With Jones	136	210	64.8%	1420	6.8	9	2	96.3	63.2
Without Jones	232	381	60.9%	2455	6.4	21	14	84.2	57.4

That's not enough to say the Dolphins are better without Jones, of course, but it's interesting to see how they improved without him in the lineup in comparison to, say, how the Seahawks fell off without Earl Thomas around. Under any circumstances, the Dolphins had Jones signed for one more season at a cap hit of \$8.0 million before the Georgia product would have hit free agency. The comparison might have been to Eric Weddle, who hit the market for his third contract at the age of 31 and picked up a four-year, \$26 million deal from Baltimore with \$13 million guaranteed.

Instead, the Dolphins broke the bank for Jones. They gave him \$60 million over five years with \$35 million in guarantees. Mike Tannenbaum roughly matched the average salary the Chiefs gave to Eric Berry, who is a three-time first-team All-Pro and nearly a full year younger than Jones. The Dolphins actually guaranteed Jones \$5.2 million more than the Chiefs promised Berry. Look at the list of safety contracts in the NFL and you'll see Jones slot ahead of everyone besides Berry and Tyrann Mathieu, who is really a cornerback when healthy. Jones also got more guaranteed money and a higher percentage of his total salary guaranteed than any other safety on a meaningful second or third contract.

Jones is a good safety being paid like a Hall of Fame-caliber defender. The Dolphins could have paid him \$33.8 million or so over the next three years by going year-to-year and keeping Jones for the final season of his current deal before franchising him twice. They locked themselves in for the next three seasons instead. It's hard to see how they saved any money with this deal, and unless Jones hits a new level of play when most safeties are beginning to decline, it's close to impossible to figure Jones will outplay this contract.

CB Dre Kirkpatrick, Bengals

Grade: C+

After the Bengals allowed Andrew Whitworth and Kevin Zeitler to leave for Los Angeles and Cleveland, respectively, you get the feeling that they had to do something to bring back one of their own. Cincinnati is loath to spend on other people's free agents, and Zeitler would have been the most obvious choice to bring back, but Kirkpatrick will join Brandon LaFell in returning.

Under Marvin Lewis, the Bengals have repeatedly invested in cornerbacks and brought them along slowly. Kirkpatrick didn't even enter the starting lineup as a regular until his fourth season with the

team. Things are different now, though, and the Bengals are more vulnerable at corner than they've been in a while. Leon Hall left last year. Adam Jones may not be back after being charged with assault in January. 2016 first-rounder William Jackson missed his entire rookie season with a torn pectoral, while 2014 first-rounder Darqueze Dennard has been virtually unplayable on defense at times during his first three years in the league.

Fourth-round pick Josh Shaw was impressive as the slot corner last season, but the Bengals will be happy to bring back some stability in Kirkpatrick. He hasn't been the model of consistency as a pro, either, but Kirkpatrick has drawn a lot of tough matchups over the past two seasons and was likely drawing interest in the \$10 million per year range on the open market. There's no word yet on guaranteed money, but the five-year, \$52.5 million deal Kirkpatrick signed to stick around in Cincinnati is hardly out of line with what other corners of Kirkpatrick's caliber were likely to receive.

CB Logan Ryan, Titans

Grade: B

It's not a surprise to see Ryan end up in Tennessee. As I mentioned earlier this year, Titans general manager Jon Robinson scouted Ryan for the Patriots and loved his college productivity. It took some time for Ryan to get there, but he had his finest season as a pro in 2016, looking every bit as good as Malcolm Butler for most of the campaign in helping push the Patriots to yet another Super Bowl.

The Titans desperately needed a cornerback after scuffling with a dismal Perrish Cox for most of 2016, so it seemed likely they would pursue Ryan. This comes in as slightly better than expected because of the price tag; the Titans had to give Ryan only three years and \$30 million, a lower average salary and a shorter deal than the deals given to A.J. Bouye and Dre Kirkpatrick. The shorter contract will allow Ryan to hit free agency again after his age-28 season, which might be costly for the Titans, but they've filled an obvious need without paying over the odds for a useful player who appears to be improving.

Broncos trampled amid start of free agency

By Woody Paige

KMGH

March 11, 2017

The NFL's version of the Running of the Bulls occurred Thursday, and the Broncos were trampled.

Annually, in July, in Pamplona, Spain, the tradition is to release six bulls, and hundreds of brave (or stupid) souls race in front of, beside, occasionally underneath, the, uh, raging bulls. It becomes a cluster.

The first day of free agency felt like that Silly Spanish Stomp – with teams going bonkers after the bulls. But while the Jaguars, the 49ers, the Eagles and others were scurrying about signing free agents, the Broncos seemed more like a bystander looking out the window.

Yes, the Broncos signed Ronald Leary, late of the Cowboys, as their new left tackle. Yet, he is not an Irishman, despite one sports radio gabber geek referring to the player as Don O'Leary (here just in time for St. Patrick's Day.)

And they did make an effort to lure Calais Campbell home to Denver (where he attended South High). But the powerful defensive end decided to take his talent to the Jaguars. I will make no Jacksonville jokes here. But Campbell said the Jags had signed a lot of good free agents, and he liked the team's direction.

He might as well have said "It's not about the money," except, really, it was all about the money, just as it was for Malik Jackson the year before. Unlike NBA players, NFL players don't consider the bright lights and the big cities, or even the winning teams. They would play in Mobile if the money was the most. (Players don't mind playing in Green Bay or Detroit or Jacksonville, although they learn when they get to Jacksonville, the city is actually more Georgia than Florida.

And truth is, because Florida has no state income tax, it is more attractive to NFL players and PGA golfers. (Nevada, BTW, has no state income tax, either, so remember that when the Raiders move.)

Texas has no state income tax. Will that be the reason Tony Romo stays in Texas rather than comes to Colorado?

"Romo Says It's Not About Money, But Does Mention Lack Of State Income Tax." Will that be the headline when he ends up with the Texans

Yeah, but we got marijuana.

I didn't particularly care that the Broncos didn't fill all their needs – defensive end, nose tackle, tight end, running back and inside linebacker. John Elway probably will bring back Vance Walker, who was good before being injured, and Sylvester Williams, and he will find a left tackle off the bargain rack, and they'll draft a tight end and a couple of offensive linemen and a linebacker, and a wide receiver, and a running back. And they'll probably draft a left tackle or a tight end or Christian McCaffrey in the first round.

But I wonder about this Romo thing.

The Broncos keep saying quietly over and over that they won't trade for Romo; they will wait until he's a free agent.

Then the Brock Osweiler news hit. The Cleveland Browns are a football team headed by baseball guys who made a basketball trade. They basically bought a 2018 second round pick from the Texans for \$16 million. They had to take Osweiler, who will be traded or released. The Texans won because they got rid of a BIG mistake, and there is no Lemon Law in football so they couldn't return him to the Broncos, who want no part of him going forward, so don't plan on that every happening, any more than Jay Cutler coming back.

The Texans, as everyone in Colorado fretted, now had the edge to beat the Broncos again – and would land Romo.

But the issue in Houston is the Texans say quietly over and over they won't make a trade for Romo.

Jerry Jones told Romo he would release him, then pulled the ball back, and thought he could trade him for something of value. Only the Broncos and the Texans are not cooperating. This is one of those men being macho men deals with all sides trying to prove who has . . . you get the idea.

I say: Pull the trigger, John.

Elway once used that line to me in a phone conversation when I asked what he would tell Tim Tebow before the playoff game: ""Pull the trigger,"" he said. Translated: Stop hesitating. Throw the football. Go all footballs out." It became a national sensation story after I wrote it, and Tebow would be asked to respond. ""He's right,"" Timmy said of Elway. (And the Broncos beat the Steelers.)

Elway should take his own advice. Pull the trigger. Make the trade.

The Broncos should send Trevor Siemian to the Jets for a fourth or fifth round draft choice, then send that pick to the Cowboys for Romo. Clean deal. Elway doesn't have to give up his own draft picks. He gets Romo, and he removes Siemian so his boy, Paxton Lynch, can train under Romo for two years before becoming the Broncos' starter.

Run with the bulls.

Broncos sign offensive tackle Menelik Watson as line overhaul continues

By Troy Renck
KMGH
March 11, 2017

They should have played one-on-one. Or at least a game of horse at the Broncos' facility.

After ditching soccer at the age of 12, Menelik Watson pursued a basketball career in England. He played semi-pro and later at Marist college as a forward. New Broncos guard Ronald Leary wanted to be like Michael Jordan. The two crossed paths in the hallway. They didn't square off, but they will be asked to providing a bruising presence in the paint if you will.

The Broncos signed the tackle to a three-year, \$18 million deal Friday, continuing the overhaul of the offensive line. A common thread connects Leary and Watson -- they play with a nasty edge. Anyone who watched the Broncos last season knows that was missing upfront. The Broncos were regularly pushed around at the point of attack.

Watson, 28, brings physicality, but his potential has been clouded by injuries. An NFL analyst summed up Watson thusly to Denver7: "Great athlete. Good feet and hands. Can't lineup every week because he's hurt."

"I have done a lot of learning the last four years," explained Watson, who has missed games because of calf, Achilles and knee injuries. "I am new to the game. We have a plan. If I can stay healthy, it can be scary."

He started 14 of the Raiders' past 32 regular season games. He plays primarily right tackle, and Denver's glaring need is on the left side. Watson played left tackle in the playoffs and struggled against the Houston Texans. Denver lost Russell Okung in free agency to the Los Angeles Chargers after declining his four-year, \$48 million option. Watson could replace him. The Broncos must decide by Monday whether to guarantee right tackle Donald Stephenson's \$4 million salary or absorb \$2 million in dead money by cutting him. It would not be a surprised if he's released after he was benched twice last season.

"They just wanted me in the building. They wanted my energy," said Watson. "The key is to be able to mesh on the offensive line. If they are getting into something, I am getting into something. If they are throwing a punch, I am throwing a punch."

There's room for growth in Watson's game given his lack of football experience. After a hoops career at Marist College, Watson began playing football in junior college at Saddleback Community College that resulted in a scholarship at Florida State. He switched to offensive line at the behest of teammate Kyle Long in the juco ranks.

"I loved it," said Watson, who learned pass protection from Long by treating the "quarterback as the basket."

A second-round draft pick in 2013, Watson represented only the second British player ever selected. He battled injuries, but won his right tackle job back two times in three seasons. What he told the BBC two years ago resonated on a Friday when the Broncos want to toughen up their line.

"Football is a man's game, and if anyone thinks that me being from England means I am soft, then they are truly, truly, truly mistaken," Watson said. "I'm from Manchester. I am from a working family, and we were fighting on school buses and fighting to get anything we wanted."

Ronald Leary brings physical attitude to Broncos' offensive line

By Troy Renck
KMGH
March 11, 2017

His big dream didn't fit his large body.

Ron Leary admitted Friday growing up "he wanted to be the next Mike." He boasted hoop star skills, but a frame more suited for a road grader than a high-volume shooter.

"I'm 320 pounds. I am not going to be Michael Jordan," Leary said.

Leary strapped on football pads as a junior in high school. He struggled, but refused to quit. As he learned the game, he honed his skills. He lettered his final two prep seasons at Southern Lab High School in Baton Rouge, La., and became one of four players to receive Division I scholarships.

Leary excelled at the University of Memphis, and despite predictions that a degenerative knee condition would derail his pro career, the only boy among his parents' seven children forged on.

"I relied on my faith," Leary said.

In Leary, the Broncos identified a physical player capable of kickstarting a running game that ranked 27th in rushing at 92.8 yards per game. As a starting left guard, he helped the Dallas Cowboys average 149.8 yards.

"We are absolutely thrilled. He's the type of player we were looking for," general manager John Elway said.

At his essence, Leary is physical blocker. Watch the game film last season, and the Broncos were regularly pushed around at the point of attack.

"Run blocking is about attitude," said Leary, who signed a four-year, \$35 million deal, with \$20 million guaranteed. "You want to be bullies on the line."

For Leary, the Broncos provided a winning environment and opportunity. He lost and regained his starting job in Dallas. There was no guarantee on playing time with the return of a healthy La'el Collins. Leary, who turns 28 in April, provides a core player for a rebuilding line that added former Oakland right tackle Menelik Watson on Friday,

"I am open to playing left or right," said Leary, who is more likely to stay on the left side. "I couldn't ask for a better situation -- great team, great teammates, great organization."

What about at quarterback? Leary left the Cowboys, who are attempting to trade veteran Tony Romo. Will Leary attempt to recruit his former teammate?

"Tony's a great guy, a great teammate. I'm here in Denver now. We have two great young quarterbacks," Leary said. "He definitely has football left."

Sly Williams leaves Broncos for Tennessee Titans on a 3-year deal

By Troy Renck

KMGH

March 11, 2017

Sylvester Williams never dreamed of playing in the NFL. He never even dreamed of playing in high school.

He grew up poor in Jefferson City, Mo. His family struggled to make a living. Their house burned down. They scabbled together money to fix up a car. It was later stolen. Williams went to work in the Modine Manufacturing plant after high school for \$400 a week. It put money in his pocket, and gave him purpose. But a coach took him to a college football game, changing his life. A junior college career led to a scholarship at North Carolina and eventually, a spot with the Denver Broncos as a first-round pick in the 2013 draft.

His journey now includes another team.

Williams turned down a Broncos' offer to stay, agreeing to a three-year contract with the Tennessee Titans. Williams confirmed the deal to Denver7 on Friday night.

Williams enjoyed his best season in 2015, helping the Broncos reach the Super Bowl with a gnarly rush defense. Given more snaps, Williams never found his traction last season as opponents rushed for 130.3 yards per game compared to 83 the previous year. His departure, while anticipated, leaves the Broncos seeking defensive line help after losing out Tampa Bay for Chris Baker.

The Broncos could lose another veteran. The Los Angeles Rams are making a strong push to sign defensive back Kayvon Webster, a special teams ace the past two seasons. Webster told Denver7 he's planning to visit the Rams, and is ironing out the exact date. While he admittedly loves paying in Denver, Webster is looking for more playing time.

His teammates believe he's ready to start. He could find a nice landing spot in Los Angeles, reuniting with former Broncos defensive coordinator Wade Phillips.

Elway once again fixes his offensive line

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

March 11, 2017

Fixing the offensive line has become an annual rite of spring in Denver.

"My goal is to make it right," Broncos general manager John Elway declared at the NFL scouting combine, where he saw a dearth of O-line prospects to choose from in next month's draft.

In the first 24 hours of free agency Elway plucked two nasty-streak players from two of the top offensive lines in the league. He signed former Cowboys guard Ron Leary for \$35 million over four years and former Raiders tackle Menelik Watson for \$18 million over three years.

In introducing the 6-foot-3, 317-pound Leary on Friday, Elway said he was "the type of player that we're looking for ... physical and tough and plays with a demeanor that makes us tougher."

Then Elway promptly retreated to his office and snared another player who fits that profile in Watson (6-5, 315), with the bonus of depleting his AFC West rival.

"They were my rivals and now they're family," Watson said. "I believe it's a great opportunity to come here and win a Super Bowl."

A year ago, Elway signed free agent tackles Russell Okung and Donald Stephenson, who proved big disappointments as the Broncos slipped from Super Bowl champions to 9-7 and out of the playoffs.

Elway declined an option on Okung, who signed a \$53 million deal with the Chargers, and he might also soon part ways with Donaldson, whose \$4 million salary for 2017 would be guaranteed if he's on the roster Monday.

Leary went undrafted out of Memphis because of a degenerative knee condition, but he's proven durable, starting 47 games in his career. He's gone from afterthought to Dallas' practice squad to starter and now priority free agent.

"I've just got to put it on the field, put it on film now," he said. "That's all behind me. Now, it's all about football. I've got to come in and show them it wasn't a mistake."

Watson, who grew up in Manchester, England, and played basketball at Marist College before picking up football in 2011, was drafted by Oakland in 2013, but his career has been marked by injuries.

He said one of the biggest draws in Denver was strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson, who has a reputation for keeping players healthy through plyometrics and position-specific weight training.

"That's why I'm here. They've got the best strength staff in the world," Watson said. "We can put all those things in the past and move on and just focus on getting on the field and just smashing heads together."

That mean streak is what drew the Broncos to Watson, who said in a BBC interview it's a mistake to think he's soft just because he grew up playing on the pitch.

"The biggest thing I know 100 percent I bring to the table is my guys know I got their backs," Watson said. "That's the type of person I am. The guys I'm in the trenches with I'm riding with, and they know if they're throwing a punch, I'm throwing a punch. Whatever they're getting into, I'm getting into."

Leary and Watson said Elway didn't talk to them about whether they'd line up left or right of Pro Bowl center Matt Paradis.

"I view myself wherever I need to be at, that's football," Watson said. "If they need me to inside, I'm playing inside, man. If they need me to play DB, shoot, I'm going out there to backpedal. I just love to play football."

NOT RECRUITING ROMO: A lot of people outside Broncos headquarters figured Elway would make a play for Dallas quarterback Tony Romo when free agency opened, but instead Elway stuck to his word and focused on fixing his O-line.

Elway has been saying that while he'd "kick the tires," on any available veteran, he's comfortable with Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch at quarterback.

If Romo does become available, don't expect Leary to put in a good word for Denver.

"Uh, no, I'm definitely not a recruiter, so I'm not going to get caught up in that at all," Leary said. "Tony's a great guy. He was a great teammate with me in Dallas, but I'm here in Denver now and we've got two great young quarterbacks in Trevor and Paxton. ... They both have bright futures."

Leary also demurred when asked if he thought Romo might retire rather than play outside Dallas.

"I haven't talked to Tony personally, so I'm not sure how he's feeling. But I definitely feel like he has some more game in him," Leary said.

Report: NFL teams violated prescription drug laws

By Lorenzo Reyes

USA Today

March 11, 2017

According to sealed court documents from a federal lawsuit uncovered by The Washington Post, NFL teams violated federal laws regarding prescription drugs, disregarded advice from the Drug Enforcement Administration and relied heavily on painkillers to treat players, prevent pain, and keep them on the field.

The 127-page filing, which originates from a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court by more than 1,800 former NFL players, contains testimony and documents from medical staffers from individual teams and the league. It recounts multiple times when officials failed to comply or were slow to respond when being made aware of abuses, issues with record keeping, and even violations of federal law.

According to The Post, the filing states that “every doctor deposed so far ... has testified that they violated one or more” federal drug laws and regulations “while serving in their capacity as a team doctor.”

In the story, The Post cites a March 2013 internal document from NFL medical adviser Lawrence Brown to show that in 2012, the average NFL team prescribed almost 5,777 doses of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and 2,213 doses of controlled medications to players.

The Post goes on to cite the complaint from the former players, who claim “numerous documents obtained during discovery show how Clubs and their doctors and trainers concealed their illegal activities for years.”

NFL vice president of communications Brian McCarthy told The Post in an email that the allegations were “meritless” and that the league would defend itself against the claims.

“The NFL clubs and their medical staffs are all in compliance with the Controlled Substances Act,” McCarthy wrote in an email. “The NFL clubs and their medical staffs continue to put the health and safety of our players first, providing all NFL players with the highest quality medical care. Any claim or suggestion to the contrary is simply wrong.”

After reaction from the story spread on Friday, however, the NFL Players Association responded and expressed concern over the details in the filing.

“The NFLPA is alarmed by the revelations in the lawsuit filed by former NFL players on the abuse of prescription drugs,” the union said Friday in a statement.

“While we are not a party to the case, the reporting by The Washington Post and Deadspin are cause for our continued concern and vigilance for holding the League accountable to its obligations. We will monitor this case closely and take all steps necessary to ensure the health and safety of our players.”

2017 NFL Free Agency: Trade-happy Patriots big winners, top receivers losers

By Sean Wagner-McGough

CBSSports.com

March 11, 2017

Friday didn't bring the same sort of chaos that Thursday brought. Instead, it was a nice, calm, relaxing, and uneventful day.

Just kidding -- the second day of free agency might've started slow, but it turned into another crazy affair. It involved:

Two trades by the Patriots

The Packers actually signing a top free agent

The best available receiver on the market landing with the Redskins

Much more.

Let's break it all down with winners and losers from Day 2 of free agency.

Winners

The Patriots: The rich get richer. Unbelievably, the Patriots -- already the best team in football -- found a way to improve substantially. They didn't do that by signing free agents but instead by engineering the trade of the offseason. Parting ways with a first-round pick, the Patriots landed Saints receiver Brandin Cooks (while also moving down from the third round to the Saints' fourth-round slot). That's a huge acquisition for the Patriots, Cooks gives Tom Brady his best deep threat since the days of Randy Moss.

Earlier Friday, the Patriots also took a chance on Kony Ealy, trading away a second-round pick to the Panthers. The Patriots got a third-round pick back, so acquiring a talented player in Ealy wasn't even that costly for the Patriots. This is a typical Patriots trade where they acquire an underperforming, but talented player, hoping they can bring out the best in him. Remember, Ealy was the guy who sacked Peyton Manning three times in Super Bowl 50. He has talent, but he's posted consecutive five-sack regular seasons, so he definitely needs to improve. Would it be shocking to anyone, though, if the Patriots turned him into a top-caliber pass rusher?

It's just what the Patriots do.

Aaron Rodgers: At the end of January, Rodgers said that the Packers needed to re-sign Jared Cook. That probably isn't going to happen, but Rodgers likely won't mind. That's because on Friday, the Packers signed Martellus Bennett.

Bennett is one the best tight ends in all of football. Since 2012, he has the sixth-most receiving yards among all tight ends. He's a good blocker. In 2016, he was Pro Football Focus' fifth-highest graded tight end.

The bottom line is that the Aaron Rodgers just got his best tight end ever. And Bennett is going from Tom Brady to Aaron Rodgers. Everyone in Green Bay wins.

Julius Peppers: At the end of his career, Peppers gets to return to the city where it all started. After successful stints in Chicago and Green Bay, Peppers is a Panther again.

Peppers, 37, needs 7.5 sacks to pass Chris Doleman for the fourth-most sacks in NFL history.

The Cowboys: They didn't do anything splashy Friday, but they made a nice few moves to address their depth.

They reportedly re-signed Terrance Williams to a four-year deal. He's appeared in every game since he entered the league in 2013 and he's averaged roughly 44 catches, 698 yards and five touchdowns per season.

The Cowboys also reportedly signed Stephen Paea to bolster the interior of their defensive line.

Paea hasn't done much since his six-sack season with the Bears in 2014, but he brings some solid upside to Dallas.

Meanwhile, the Cowboys also reportedly added a cornerback to the mix.

@DMN_George

New Cowboys CB Nolan Carroll started 16 games last yr for Philadelphia & had 55 tackles, 1 interception & 11 PBUs (would have led Dallas).

Again, none of these players are household names, but that's OK. A team like the Cowboys, who went 13-3 last year, doesn't need to make any splashy signings. They just need to bolster their roster and fix some of their weaknesses. That's what they did Friday.

Offensive tackles: The big men continue to cash in. On Thursday, it was Matt Kalil who got a \$55.5 million contract. On Friday, the Vikings reportedly signed Riley Reiff to a five-year deal worth \$58.75 million.

@RapSheet

Man, this offensive tackle market was crazy. #Vikings signed LT Riley Reiff to a 5-year deal worth \$58.75M. \$26.3M guaranteed.

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Man, this offensive tackle market was crazy. #Vikings signed LT Riley Reiff to a 5-year deal worth \$58.75M. \$26.3M guaranteed.

When I grow up, I want to be an offensive lineman.

The Colts' pass rush: It's pretty rare when we praise the Colts outside of Andrew Luck, but they actually did something good Friday. By reportedly signing ex-Patriots defensive lineman Jabaal Sheard, the Colts addressed an area that needed fixing: their pass rush, which notched only 33 sacks last season. Sheard has 13 sacks in the past two seasons.

Losers

Top-end receivers: Like Alshon Jeffery, Terrelle Pryor didn't get the long-term lucrative contract he wanted in free agency. Like Jeffery, Pryor was forced to sign a one-year contract, which means he'll enter his second straight contract year.

Unlike Jeffery, Pryor landed with the most dysfunctional organization in football. The most he can make in Washington? \$8 million after incentives.

Speaking of Jeffery, his \$14 million deal from Thursday actually includes \$4.5 million in incentives. That's right, one year after earning the franchise tag for the Bears, the talented receiver isn't even guaranteed to make eight figures on the next contract he signed. What this year's market is for offensive linemen, it's the opposite for receivers.

RG3: For a second straight offseason, Robert Griffin III is looking for another team. The Browns reportedly cut him Friday. His brief stay in Cleveland did not go well. It began with an injury in his first game and ended with a 1-4 record, two touchdowns and three picks, and a 72.5 passer rating.

Next up for RG3: Maybe the Jets. Somehow, RG3 could actually go from the Browns to an even worse team.

Tony Romo: Romo's future is still in limbo. The good news: The long wait isn't forcing him to consider a career in TV:

@Edwerderespn

Tony Romo wants to play football, and he will pursue that, likely with #Texans and/or #Broncos, once released or traded. TV after retirement

Even after trading away Brock Osweiler, the Texans reportedly aren't willing to trade for Romo. According to the Dallas Morning News' David Moore, Romo is in for a long wait:

Barring unforeseen movement on the trade front, sources said nothing is expected to happen with the veteran quarterback this weekend. One source went as far as to say "it's optimistic" to suggest Romo's status with the Cowboys will be determined in the next week

At least he'll have time to film some more videos.

Winner and Loser

This is a special category and it's entirely reserved for Jimmy Garoppolo. Allow me to explain.

The day began with Garoppolo firmly positioned in the "losers" portion of this column. After all, his Instagram was hacked and the Patriots reportedly wanted the Browns' No. 1 pick in exchange for him. If that was the actual price tag the Patriots attached to Garoppolo, they were unlikely to move him this offseason, which means Garoppolo appeared to be destined to spend the 2017 season on the sidelines.

And then the trades happened. First, the Patriots sent a second-round pick to the Panthers for Kony Ealy and a third-round pick. Then they traded for Brandin Cooks, giving up a first and third rounder (they did get a fourth-round pick back). Remember: They're also missing a fourth-round pick due to Deflategate.

The point being, the Patriots are suddenly in need of draft ammunition. Luckily, they still happen to have a highly desirable quarterback sitting on the bench behind Brady. Those two trades might force Bill Belichick to re-think his stance on Garoppolo.

Before the trade, La Canfora wrote this:

DePodesta and Belichick think very much alike, both are rooting heavily in an economist approach to pro sports, and the Browns and Patriots have already done plenty of business together in recent years. Neither team would have to do a thing until just before the draft and a trade could still come together. No one is better than Belichick at playing hardball and then ultimately squeezing for more than he could have hoped for (he would parlay some of these picks into a trade for Saints receiver Brandin Cooks, for instance, who he really likes and still have plenty left over to move up and down the draft board the next few years).

The same thinking applies, just in a different order. The Patriots got Cooks, now they need draft picks.

“No guarantee” Broncos will pursue Tony Romo if released

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
March 11, 2017

As the dance between the Cowboys and quarterback Tony Romo continues, one of his potential destinations is making a few moves as well.

James Palmer of NFL Media reports that there’s “no guarantee” the Broncos will pursue Romo even if he’s released. The obvious import of the leak is clear; the Broncos want the Cowboys to understand that they won’t be trading for Romo under any circumstances.

And so the Cowboys, Romo, the Broncos, and the Texans continue to wait for something to happen. Or for nothing to happen.

There’s no immediate deadline. The Cowboys need to resolve the situation as a practical matter before the start of the offseason program in April, because a season-ending injury suffered by Romo during the lifting and conditioning sessions would put the Cowboys on the hook for the full \$14 million he’s due to make this year.

Unless and until Romo decides to take the matter public (he likely won’t), don’t be surprised if the Cowboys slam the brakes on this one until the league meetings later this month, hopeful that the annual collection of all coaches, General Managers, and owners will result in either the Texans or the Broncos (or someone else) blinking.

The Romo-Jones dance continues

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
March 11, 2017

On Wednesday, the Cowboys told quarterback Tony Romo he'd be released. On Thursday, the Cowboys didn't release him.

Since then, the Cowboys have been waiting for a trade offer, and Romo hasn't said or done anything publicly to agitate for a release. But his representatives apparently have launched a more subtle effort to remind the Cowboys that it will be hard to trade him if he just retires.

Coincidentally (not coincidentally), someone from CAA told Adam Schefter of ESPN that FOX wants to hire Romo as the No. 2 analyst on the network's football coverage, replacing 49ers G.M. John Lynch. The message to the Cowboys is clear, but Romo can maintain full and complete deniability and otherwise stay on the high road.

Romo isn't wired to get into a public back and forth with the Cowboys or Jerry Jones, and for now it seems that Romo will choose to be patient. His agents will otherwise come up with strategies for making sure everyone knows Romo has a Plan B to playing in 2017.

Of course, if Romo retires, he'll owe \$5 million in previously paid signing bonus money. But that's only an issue if he actually retires. For now, the possibility of retirement is being used to ensure that he'll eventually get to pick his next team, unfettered by the Cowboys or anyone else.

Broncos sign Menelik Watson

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
March 11, 2017

The Broncos opened free agency by signing guard Ronald Leary on Thursday and they continued focusing on their offensive line on Friday.

According to multiple reports, the Broncos are signing tackle Menelik Watson as a free agent. It's a three-year deal for Watson, who spent the day visiting with the team in Denver.

Watson was a second-round pick of the Raiders in 2013, but they never saw quite enough of him on the field because of injuries. Watson missed all of 2015 and started just 17 games over his other three seasons, including five games during the 2016 season.

Right tackle was Watson's most frequent position in Oakland, although the Broncos have an opening on the other side of the line after parting way with Russell Okung.

Menelik Watson looks to fulfill potential as he joins Broncos

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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There is no question that Menelik Watson has the raw athleticism to succeed at offensive tackle.

It's just a matter of staying healthy -- which in turn, gives him the opportunities to refine his game that he still needs, given that he remains a relative newcomer to the sport.

Nearly all of Watson's NFL experience is at right tackle, although he did make a single start at left tackle for the injured Donald Penn during the Raiders' wild-card loss at Oakland two months ago.

"We'll see where he fits," Executive Vice President/General Manager John Elway said Friday.

Watson is still evolving as a player. He didn't take up American football until 2011 at Saddleback College in California, a two-year college to which he transferred after two seasons playing basketball at Marist College. Watson parlayed that single junior-college season into a scholarship at Florida State. Then he shot onto NFL radars with dramatic improvement at FSU and impressive measurables that included 34-inch arms.

But Watson also needed time and repetitions to channel that athletic ability into elite performance. That hasn't happened because of injuries that include a calf problem last year, a torn Achilles tendon that cost him the entire 2015 season, a concussion during the 2014 season and recurring calf and knee issues in 2013.

All told, Watson has played in just 28 of a possible 65 games, with 18 starts -- including a single fill-in playoff assignment at left tackle last January, when he was forced to step in for Donald Penn.

At 28 and with just five previous years of regular-season football experience, the 6-foot-5, 315-pound Watson still has untapped upside. But first, he must stay healthy.

For that, he will count on the Broncos' strength and conditioning staff.

Ron Leary finds comfort zone in line scheme, new Broncos teammates

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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While the offensive tackles remain in flux one day into the new league year, Ronald Leary's arrival at the UCHHealth Training Center on Friday brought the projected interior line trio for the 2017 season together for the first time.

As Leary made his rounds as Broncos headquarters, he met with guard Max Garcia and center Matt Paradis, both of whom are offseason staples at the facility. Paradis is on hand as he continues his rehabilitation from the two hip surgeries he underwent early in the offseason.

"They're great guys," Leary said. "I already knew something about them just from watching them on film and just talking to other guys around the league, so I knew they were good guys.

"Just talking to them, they want to win. They want to be great. So you can't do [anything] but respect that. They're excited for me to be [here]; I'm more excited to be here with them, so I'm looking forward to it."

Leary did not specify where he expected to play, nearly all of his NFL snaps have come at left guard. That would necessitate Garcia moving to right guard, although Leary said he would be willing to flip sides if asked.

But at either side, Leary is looking forward to his partnership with Paradis.

"He's definitely one of the best centers in the league," Leary said.

Leary said that he "didn't talk too much" about the scheme with Offensive Line Coach Jeff Davidson, adding that their meeting was more about making Leary comfortable on his new team.

"Just letting everybody know that they wanted me here and that it was going to be a good fit for me-- and I believe it will be," Leary said.

Dallas' scheme doesn't mesh perfectly with the one Denver is installing, but Leary said the Cowboys worked on a variety of concepts in addition to the zone elements they used last year, which will fit well as the Broncos transition to a hybrid philosophy that employs elements from zone and power schemes.

"I definitely feel I can play in any scheme," Leary said. "In Dallas, we were a heavy zone-blocking team, but we ran some power [and] a lot of man stuff too. We probably practiced it more than we ran it. But I definitely feel comfortable in any scheme, so that won't be a problem."

And while Leary is in the spotlight as the Broncos' first free-agent addition of 2017, he's only part of the potential solution up front -- and he knows it.

"It's not going to be about me. It's going to be more as a unit," Leary said. "If we can come strong together as a unit, then as an O-line we can help lead the offense -- not just particularly one person."

Further, Leary added that the line's ability to come together and succeed is not predicated on which quarterback wins the expected competition between Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch.

"I don't think it affects us too much at all," Leary said. "I think we need just to focus on our job: our blocks, our schemes and getting to know each other better, because there are going to be some new faces, and just work on being better."

"If we work on our assignments up front, those two quarterbacks, they're going to do their thing. So whichever one's under center, as long as we're doing our job, they'll feel confident."

Tackle Menelik Watson agrees to terms with Broncos on three-year contract

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
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For the second year in a row, the Broncos have drawn an offensive tackle to switch loyalties from an AFC West rival in free agency.

Tackle Menelik Watson, a four-year veteran previously with the Raiders, has agreed to terms on a three-year contract with Denver as the team looks to build up its offensive line.

Watson was drafted by Oakland in the second round of the 2013 NFL Draft with the 42nd overall pick, but he has struggled with injuries since entering the league. Even though he was inactive for the first seven games of his rookie season, Watson recovered to play in five games, starting three. In his second season, he played in 12 games with nine starts before a foot/ankle injury sidelined him for the final four weeks of the year. Watson missed the 2015 season after suffering a torn Achilles tendon in Oakland's third preseason game.

In 2016, Watson recovered to play in 10 games, and returned to a starting role for six games, including their final two games of the season and the playoff game against Houston.

Originally from Manchester, England, Watson is still relatively new to football, as he began playing competitive football at Saddleback (Calif.) College in 2011. His athleticism and potential quickly made him a top junior-college target, drawing interest from top Division-I schools. He chose Florida State for his final season of eligibility, leveraging the opportunity into an All-ACC honorable mention selection and then a second-round draft selection in 2013.