

Without Tony Romo, Broncos losing big ground to New England in Super Bowl chase

By Mark Kiszla
Denver Post
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The Broncos need quarterback Tony Romo to save them now.

The big-money results from NFL free agency are in. And they ain't pretty for Denver.

New England crushed the Broncos. Maybe you can't win the Super Bowl in March. But, during the last 72 hours, Denver general manager John Elway lost big ground to Tom Brady and the Patriots.

Here's what New England did: 1) Signed Pro Bowl cornerback Stephon Gilmore; 2) Traded for receiver Brandin Cooks, who had more receiving yards and touchdown catches last season than Denver's Emmanuel Sanders; and 3) Added Dwayne Allen, a tight end so aggravating that Broncos cornerback Aqib Talib once tried to gouge him in the eye.

Those moves by Bill Belichick screamed: That's our Vince Lombardi Trophy. Keep your mitts off it!

Here's how Elway responded to his AFC archrival: 1) Came in second place to Jacksonville in the free-agent race for Calais Campbell, a run-stopper so strong that Broncos defenders openly lobbied for his addition; 2) Signed Ron Leary, a road-grader of a guard who wishes he could fly like Michael Jordan; and 3) Replaced disappointing nose tackle Sylvester Williams with Domata Peko, which is no upgrade at all.

Those attempts to upgrade the Denver roster could be described in one word: Zzz.

The apologists paid to kiss Elway's rings will tell you the Broncos got down and dirty in free agency, emphasizing substance over sizzle. Yes, NFL games can be won in the trenches. But remind me again how many touchdowns Leary will score for Denver in 2017 compared with the number of times Cooks hauls in a pass from Brady in the end zone.

When I asked Leary what role the opportunity to win played in his decision to join the Broncos, he said: "This is a championship organization. That's the goal every year."

It's a sincere, laudable goal. But, so far, Denver hasn't done much to improve from being a 9-7 football team.

Nobody can blame Elway for letting offensive tackle Russell Okung walk as a free agent, especially seeing how the Chargers overpaid Okung by enough money to buy a beach house in Malibu. But trying to hide the deficiencies in Denver's offensive line by signing tackle Menelik Watson was some weak sauce. Want some cold, hard numbers? Read these and weep: The video analysts at Pro Football Focus gave Okung a grade of 73.5 in 2016. Watson graded out at 49.4.

The eye in the sky doesn't lie. The video on Peko, signed off the Bengals' roster for two years and \$7.5 million, reveals he's more experienced than Williams, but no better at playing nose tackle. Let's compare their Pro Football Focus scores: Williams, 43.5; Peko, 42.6.

What the Broncos need now is a Hail Mary. Or a hello, Tony.

Cowboys owner Jerry Jones is trying to make Elway beg — and surrender a draft pick — for Romo. But, unlike the time Peyton Manning was deemed dispensable by Indianapolis in 2012, no NFL team is going to send a private jet to woo Romo. So the Broncos have a pretty decent chance of staying in this game merely by exhibiting patience and waiting for Dallas to cut Romo.

But make no mistake. The Broncos need Romo more than they did a week ago.

While the addition of Leary was solid, Elway has done little else to close the gap on the scoreboard when the Patriots come to Denver for a regular-season game in the fall. With a large hole still to be plugged at left tackle, the Broncos have painted themselves into a corner of drafting for need in the first round rather than for impact, increasing the likelihood they will select somebody like Utah tackle Garrett Bolles rather than somebody like Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey, which would generate far more buzz in town.

The Broncos not only surrendered their championship to the Patriots, they watched as the eyes of the NFL nation drifted from Denver to New England and Dallas. Romo might break his back trying, but know what he could immediately do for the Broncos? Put them back in the center of the NFL conversation.

Trevor Siemian can't steal the spotlight from Brady. Romo might.

All we're asking for is a chance.

Broncos add Domata Peko, Zach Kerr to beef up defensive line

By Cameron Wolfe
Denver Post
March 12, 2017

The Broncos continued their big man pursuit Saturday, this time on defense, agreeing to two-year contracts with nose tackles Domata Peko and Zach Kerr, per NFL sources.

Denver general manager John Elway hasn't signed a player this offseason under 300 pounds in an effort to get stronger, meaner and more physical up front on both sides of the ball.

Peko, 32, will sign a 2-year, \$7.5 million deal, including 3.8 million guaranteed in year one, a source said. He'll likely be the leading candidate to replace recently departed starting nose tackle Sylvester Williams, who signed a three-year deal with Tennessee on Friday.

It's a family reunion as the Broncos now have two Pekos on their roster. Kyle Peko, a 2016 undrafted nose tackle who played in the season finale, is the younger cousin of Domata.

Domata Peko, 6-foot-3, 325 pounds, spent the first 11 seasons of his career in Cincinnati, 10 as a starter. During that time, he was one of their biggest vocal leaders and he's also remarkably durable starting all 16 regular-season games in nine seasons.

Peko struggled in 2016, as did most of the Bengals. Elway likely is hoping he gets a year or two of solid play out of a big nose tackle while likely drafting a replacement to groom behind him.

Kerr, 26, spent the first three years of his career with the Colts. The 6-2, 334-pound defensive tackle has eight starts over three seasons. He played nose tackle and defensive end in the Colts' 3-4 scheme. He seemed to have more success when used as a penetrating player.

He could compete with Peko for the starting nose tackle job, but he's likely to see reps at defensive end, where Denver also has a need.

Kerr had one of his best games of 2016 against the Broncos, notching a sack and two tackles for loss.

Both Peko and Kerr were added to improve the Broncos' porous run defense. Denver gave up 130.3 rushing yards per game last season, dropping in the NFL rankings from third in 2015 to 28th in 2016.

A big priority for Elway and coach Vance Joseph is to make sure they aren't bullied anymore up front. The early signings of four strong offensive and defensive linemen make that clear.

9News was the first to report the defensive line signings.

Broncos fortify defensive front by signing Peko, Kerr

By Mike Klis

9News

March 12, 2017

Party at the Pekos.

The Denver Broncos fortified their defensive line in a massive way Saturday by signing two-year contracts with both former Cincinnati Bengal Domata Peko and former Indianapolis Colt Zach Kerr, sources told 9News.

That's more than 650 pounds of front-line reinforcement as the Broncos take on the enormous Oakland Raiders' offensive line twice a year.

Once again, in John Elway, Broncos fans trust. Although the Broncos didn't land all their targets on the first day of free agency, Elway added two new starters on their offensive line in left guard Ron Leary and right tackle Menelik Watson, and potentially two new starters on their defensive front in Peko and Kerr.

Zach Kerr (Photo: Andy Lyons, 2014 Getty Images)

The Broncos needed defensive line help after allowing 130.3 rushing yards per game last season to rank 28th in the 32-team NFL.

Peko, 32, is the older cousin of Broncos' defensive lineman Kyle Peko, who as an undrafted rookie played well in Denver's final game last season.

Yes, Domata Peko is getting up there, but he also had a career-best 5.0 sacks as recently as 2015. And he may be the NFL's most durable defensive lineman as he's played all 16 games in 10 of his 11 seasons. That's nothing short of remarkable.

At 6-foot-3, 322 pounds, Peko figures to replace Sylvester Williams in the middle of the Broncos' 3-4 front. Williams signed a three-year deal Friday with the Tennessee Titans.

Peko got a two-year, \$7.5 million contract from the Broncos, including \$3.8 million in 2017 pay that is fully guaranteed. He is considered an ultimate locker room guy as with the Bengals he often hosted a gathering for the entire 53-man roster and their wives each year following final roster cuts.

Kerr, who will turn 27 before the season opener, has been a rotational-type player for the Colts as both a nose tackle and 3-4 defensive end. Undrafted out of Delaware in 2014, Kerr played in 12 games each of his three seasons with the Colts, then became available as a non-tendered restricted free agent.

Somebody in the Broncos' front office or coaching staff, though, saw potential in Kerr.

The Broncos' most glaring need now is at left tackle, although they could also use a pass-rushing outside linebacker if they don't bring back DeMarcus Ware.

It's possible the Broncos could address left tackle by both moving Donald Stephenson over from the right side and utilizing their No. 20 overall selection in the first round or No. 51 pick in the second.

And, no, the Broncos have not dismissed the possibility of pursuing Tony Romo if the Dallas quarterback is released.

Contract details for Leary, Watson: \$16.875 million in 2017

By Mike Klis

9News

March 12, 2017

Leary, who will likely play left guard, received a four-year, \$36 million contract with an impressive \$18.75 million fully guaranteed at signing.

Watson, who will play right tackle, received a three-year, \$18.75 million deal that includes \$5.375 million fully guaranteed at signing.

For the Broncos, that's a combined fully guaranteed commitment of \$23.75 million for their two new offensive linemen, \$54.75 million in all.

The most impressive aspect of Leary's contract is the \$11 million in 2017 cash alone, broken up into a \$3.5 million signing bonus, \$5 million roster bonus and \$2.5 million salary.

Leary's \$7.65 million salary in 2018 is also fully guaranteed. He also has \$250,000 in cumulative per-game roster bonuses and a \$100,000 workout bonus so if Leary plays in all 16 games in 2018 he will collect \$8 million.

In each of the final two years of Leary's contract, 2019 and 2020, he is scheduled to make a \$8.15 million salary, \$250,000 in per game roster bonuses and \$100,000 workout bonuses. His 2019 salary is

guaranteed against injury only.

The most significant aspect of Watson's contract is he received a \$4 million signing bonus, \$1.25 million salary, \$125,000 workout bonus and \$500,000 in cumulative per game roster bonuses for \$5.875 million in 2017. (Donald Stephenson got \$6 million in year one pay last season).

Watson then has a \$5.5 million salary guaranteed against injury only in 2018 and non-guaranteed \$5.5 million salary in 2019.

Broncos believe Menelik Watson's still untapped potential worth the risk

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
March 12, 2017

For much of his time in the NFL Menelik Watson has been a mix of enticing football potential and a pile of injury frustration.

When he plays it's easy to see the athletic blend of a former starter for the Marist basketball team and the power of a rare football player still learning the game who still has room on the developmental curve to be better. But Watson has been -- pick a word, any word -- unlucky, vexed, hexed, cursed with injuries so far in his career.

An assortment of pulls and tears, including a missed season in 2015 with a ruptured Achilles tendon, has meant he has not played more than 12 games in any of his previous four NFL seasons. An aggravating trend for him that Watson hopes ends with his arrival to the Denver Broncos.

"That is why I'm here," Watson said. "We've got the best strength staff in the world. I've talked diligently with those guys. Me moving forward in my career, I've done a lot of learning my first four years in the NFL. As you guys know, this is my sixth year of football in total. I've just had to learn a lot about myself and a lot about my body."

Watson got a three-year, \$18.3 million deal from the Broncos because his potential is attractive and they've seen him work with a division rival in his time with the Oakland Raiders. Watson plays with the kind of edge the Broncos have tried to add to their offensive line and he figures to start at right tackle if fate and good fortune will allow him to find a way stay out of the trainer's room.

Watson was a starter and playing like it last season when he was derailed by a groin injury in the opener and later a calf injury that he said cost him two more games. As a result he played in 10 games last season, starting five.

But Raiders' strength and conditioning coach Joe Gomes is a long-time associate of Broncos' strength and conditioning coach Luke Richesson and the Broncos received a high recommendation from Gomes about Watson.

"Right now, I'm putting myself in the best place, along with (the Broncos) assistants, are some of the greatest in the world," Watson said. "We can put all of those things in the past and just move on, focus on getting on the field and just smashing heads together."

The Broncos made guard Ronald Leary a priority target in free agency's opening hours and Watson's visit Friday turned into a contract signing by the end of the day. Both figure to be in line to start in a re-made offensive line.

Leary and Max Garcia project in the two guard spots for the Broncos, while Watson was signed to be the starter at right tackle.

The Broncos are fully aware of the 28-year-old Watson's injury history, but the tackle market in free agency was thin, especially in terms of players with the capability to be starters who were also under 30 years old. The draft, beyond the first round, is also thin in potential walk-in starters as rookies.

So, Watson is a bit of a gamble, but if the Broncos get it right, they get a physical, athletic presence at right tackle.

"As you can tell, he's a very big and physical player that will bring that mentality," said Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway. "We're really excited about it. We had our eyes on Menelik when we played him earlier in the year. We're just thrilled that he's decided to join us."

Watson has played some left tackle, where the Broncos still have an opening in the starting lineup, but he didn't look all that comfortable or instinctive at the position. Born in Manchester, England, he came to the United States as a basketball player at Marist and only began playing football with one year in junior college and one year as Florida State's right tackle before he was a second-round pick by the Raiders in 2013.

"I view myself wherever I need to be," Watson said. "That's football. If they need me to play inside, I'm playing inside. They need me to play DB, I'm going to go out there and backpedal ... That's the reason I did this thing. I've loved this sport from the first day I stepped out on the field and they taught me how to strap on my helmet. I just fell in love with this sport -- any opportunity I get to play football. I don't care. I'm here. Whatever position they put me in, I'm just going to try and win my matchup. That's all that matters."

Broncos believe Menelik Watson's still untapped potential worth the risk

By Katherine Terrell

ESPN.com

March 12, 2017

The Denver Broncos have agreed to two-year contracts with free-agent defensive tackles Domata Peko and Zach Kerr, according to multiple reports.

Peko, whose deal is worth \$7.5 million according to reports, is the second longtime Bengals lineman to leave Cincinnati in free agency, joining Andrew Whitworth, who signed with the Los Angeles Rams. Peko started all 16 games in nine of his 11 seasons with the Bengals. He had 37 tackles, three run stuffs and a fumble recovery in 2016.

He is joining his cousin, nose tackle Kyle Peko, in Denver.

Domata Peko has 517 career tackles, two forced fumbles and four fumble recoveries. During his career, Peko has also lined up as an extra blocker in the offensive backfield in short-yardage situations.

Kerr played 36 games in three seasons with the Indianapolis Colts, starting four times in both 2015 and 2016.

Poor play in the trenches cost the Broncos dearly last season as they failed to make the playoffs after winning the Super Bowl a year ago.

General manager John Elway added two offensive line starters Friday by signing free agents Menelik Watson and Ron Leary. Then he turned his attention to the defensive line.

The Broncos sorely missed Malik Jackson, who bolted to Jacksonville a year ago, and Vance Walker, who sustained a season-ending knee injury in training camp. Their inability to stuff the run or produce pressure from the middle negated their strengths: Von Miller rushing the passer and Aqib Talib and Chris Harris Jr. defending the pass.

The four free-agent signings, all of whom weigh more than 300 pounds, meet Elway's goal of filling his biggest needs in free agency so that he can go into next month's draft and focus on adding talent rather than plugging holes.

AP source: Broncos lure Peko from Cincy, Kerr from Indy

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

March 12, 2017

A person with knowledge of the deals tells The Associated Press that the Denver Broncos have agreed to terms with free agent defensive tackles Domata Peko of the Bengals and Zach Kerr of the Colts.

Peko and Kerr agreed to two-year deals, said the person who spoke on condition of anonymity because the Broncos weren't commenting on the agreements.

Peko, whose deal is worth \$7.5 million, is the second longtime Bengals lineman to leave Cincinnati in free agency, joining offensive lineman Andrew Whitworth, who signed with the Rams. Peko started all 16 games in nine of his 11 seasons with the Bengals.

He's joining his cousin, nose tackle Kyle Peko, in Denver.

Kerr played in 36 games in three seasons with the Colts, starting four times in both 2015 and '16.

Poor play in the trenches cost the Broncos dearly last season as they failed to make the playoffs after winning the Super Bowl a year ago.

GM John Elway added two new O-line starters Friday by signing free agents Menelik Watson and Ron Leary. Then, he turned his attention to plugging holes on the D-line.

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Broncos add big defensive linemen in Domata Peko, Zach Kerr

By Troy Renck
KMGH
March 12, 2017

The Broncos continue to repeat the following refrain in the free agency drive thru: Super Size Me.

One day after adding a pair of burly offensive linemen, the Broncos beefed up the defense with tackles Domata Peko and Zach Kerr.

Every player joining the Broncos this offseason eclipses 300 pounds. If the idea behind signing guard Ronald Leary and tackle Menelik Watson was to get tougher, Peko and Kerr were brought in to make the defense bigger.

Opponents gashed the Broncos for 130.3 yards per game last season, plummeting Denver to 28th in the rankings. The Broncos sat third in 2015 at 83.6, which made teams one dimensional and led them into the unfriendly skies of the No Fly Zone. Peko, whose younger cousin Kyle saw time at defensive tackle for the Broncos as a rookie last season, struggled with consistency in 2016. He didn't produce a sack after netting five the previous season. However, he played well against the Broncos on Sept. 25. Denver finished with 52 yards rushing, its third lowest total of the season.

"We couldn't run on him. He was stout," Broncos all-pro cornerback Chris Harris told Denver7. "Go watch the film."

The Broncos apparently did. They thought enough of the 32-year-old to sign him to a two-year deal with \$3.8 million guaranteed. Peko, 6-foot-3, 325 pounds, owns 518 tackles and 18.5 sacks in 11 seasons, all with the Bengals.

Kerr, 26, checks in at 6-2, 334 pounds. The Colts moved on him after he showed flashes in three seasons, but never settled into one position. He played nose tackle, defensive tackle and defensive end in Indianapolis. He produced 2.5 sacks last season. The Broncos see him as underrated player who could blossom with more playing time. Peko and Kerr will compete for starting jobs. The Broncos lacked beef upfront a year ago after Malik Jackson signed with Jacksonville and Vance Walker blew out his knee in training camp. Adam Gotsis, Sly Williams and Billy Winn were unable to consistently win at the point of attack.

In Peko and Kerr, size matters. Last year the Broncos got pushed around in the AFC West, particularly at Oakland. The Raiders ran for 218 yards in a win on Nov. 6, and the Chiefs plowed for 238 on Christmas night, crushing the Broncos' playoff hopes. Defensive coordinator Joe Woods told Denver7 on multiple occasions that improving the run defense was a "top priority."

The Broncos have adopted a patience, purposeful approach in free agency. They added Leary and Watson on four and three-year deals, guaranteeing roughly \$24 million. Peko's guarantee is \$3.8 million with Kerr less. The Broncos still have room under the salary cap if they want to pursue a quarterback. Tony Romo, though, has never been a top priority this offseason, and the Broncos are not inclined to

trade for him. If he becomes a free agent, they are expected to talk to him. However, this is not Peyton Manning pursuit 2.0. With Manning, the Broncos moved all their chips to the center of the table with general manager John Elway admitting there was no Plan B.

In this case, the Broncos are not looking to replace Tim Tebow. The Broncos feel comfortable with Trevor Siemian, the favorite to keep his starting job at this point, and Paxton Lynch. Mike McCoy's uptempo offense suits both their skillsets. Teammates also believe Siemian will improve because he will have more freedom at the line of scrimmage than allowed in Gary Kubiak's offense. Any pursuit of Romo would come with a caveat. He would have to be willing to play at a figure the Broncos believe fits their salary cap and protects them against injury. Romo will be 37 in April and has made four starts the past two seasons.

The Broncos own 10 draft picks and have addressed the offensive and defensive lines. More improvement is necessary, but multiple boxes have been checked with the first workouts less than a month away.

Some Broncos fans stunned to learn they won't be allowed to renew season ticket license

By Lance Hernandez

KMGH

March 12, 2017

An attempt by the Denver Broncos to accommodate fans at the top of the club's season ticket waiting list, is raising the ire of a few current season ticket holders.

"I've had season tickets since 1988," said Gary Itao, a longtime fan. "I've sat in the south stands for 30 years."

Itao told Denver7 that he doesn't know how much longer he'll be sitting there. He pointed to a letter which the Broncos emailed to him Friday evening.

The letter said in part:

After careful review and consideration of your account activity, we have determined that you did not personally use your tickets for even a single game in 2016. As a result, we regret to inform you that your season ticket license will not be renewed.

Itao was stunned. He said he's been a loyal fan for decades and so has his father.

"He drives all the way from Glenwood Springs, which is not easy to travel during winter weather," Itao said. "He makes the trip out here for most of the games."

Itao disputes the Broncos' claim that he didn't attend a single game this past season.

He said he has season tickets for four seats and that he attended at least five games using two of those seats.

He showed Denver7 a printout of credit card charges, which he said proves he was at five games.

- 08/20 Denver Broncos Merchandise \$14.50
- 10/09 Denver Broncos Concession \$19.50
- 10/24 Denver Broncos Concession \$21.25
- 10/30 Denver Broncos Concession \$18.50
- 11/27 Denver Broncos Concession \$13.75

Itao said he attended Super Bowl 50 earlier in the year, and that his wife purchased a couple of commemorative jackets, one for him and one for his father.

He admits that he sold tickets for two of the four seats, but added that many other fans do the same thing.

He said he can't believe the Broncos won't allow him to renew his season ticket license.

"Not one ticket...after 30 years," he said. "It's pretty disturbing."

Itao said he broke the news to his dad over the weekend.

"He's devastated," the son said.

Special Circumstances

The letter being sent out to certain season ticket holders also states:

As you are aware and as stated in our season ticket agreement, Broncos season tickets are revocable licenses granted on a yearly basis at the sole discretion of the club. Therefore, the purchase of previous season tickets does not guarantee the ability to secure future season tickets.

The Broncos told Denver7 there may be special circumstances where season ticket holders were not able to attend any games in 2016.

"They might be serving in the military, had health issues or a personal family situation," said Patrick Smythe. "Those fans can contact the ticket office to get it resolved. They may have to provide some documentation."

The ticket office number is 720-258-3333.

Smythe said fans can also communicate via email. That address is: Tickets@broncos.nfl.net

For NFL teams, keeping in-house talent made for some of free agency's best deals

By Jarrett Bell
USA Today
March 12, 2017

For all of the eye-popping deals on the NFL market this week that marked the opening of a new league year, some of the most significant moves were those that allowed teams to keep their own.

The Baltimore Ravens kept nose tackle Brandon Williams in the fold. Pass-rushing force Nick Perry is staying put with the Green Bay Packers. The New Orleans Saints don't have to replace defensive Nick Fairley.

Granted, an overwhelming majority of players getting new contracts amid the downpour of fresh dollars left for greener pastures elsewhere.

But addition by avoiding subtraction can be such a virtue, too, with another huge increase in the NFL's salary cap – rising to \$167 million per team this year, or \$47 million more than five years ago – leaving teams better equipped to compete for players poised to hit the road.

Take the Ravens with Williams, a player they developed as a third-round pick from Missouri Southern State. The anchor for one of the league's best run defenses, Williams was general manager Ozzie Newsome's No. 1 priority in free agency.

Now he's the NFL's highest-paid nose tackle with a five-year, \$54 million contract that guarantees \$27.5 million.

Rather than putting the franchise tag on Williams – which is the track the Arizona Cardinals took with outside linebacker Chandler Jones before re-signing him to a five-year, \$83 million deal – the Ravens gambled with the risk of losing him.

They had to sweat it out, with Williams undoubtedly among the top 10 eligible free agents. But in signing him to a deal averaging \$10.8 million instead of keeping him on a franchise tag of \$13.4 million, the Ravens had additional wiggle room under their cap that aided them in luring safety Tony Jefferson and running back Danny Woodhead.

No, Newsome couldn't keep right tackle Ricky Wagner (who signed with the Detroit Lions) or fullback Kyle Juszczyk (San Francisco 49ers), but the massively athletic Williams would have been so much tougher to replace.

Ted Thompson can relate. The Packers general manager has had a long history of building through the draft and keeping talent at home. He risked losing Perry, his first-round pick in 2012, to a market that pays a premium for edge rushers.

The timing was right for Perry, too. He is coming off an 11-sack breakout year. Even though the Packers didn't franchise-tag Perry, coach Mike McCarthy calls him a "core player" as he works alongside Clay Matthews for the much-needed pass-rush tandem in Dom Capers' defense.

The risk was such that Perry even took a sentimental lap around Lambeau Field last week, like it might have been the last time. In the end, Green Bay kept him with a five-year, \$60 million deal that included \$18.5 million guaranteed.

In assessing his new deal before reporters in Green Bay, Perry acknowledged the growing pains he's endured and a mission to hit a higher level.

He also reflected an approach to free agency that seemingly increases the odds for success: It's better to stick with a known quantity rather than bank on the unknown.

I mean, since the current labor deal was struck in 2011, no team in the NFL compares to the Jacksonville Jaguars when it comes to high-priced free agent signings ... and no team in the NFL has lost more games during that period.

Then again, there's more money to spend, which is why it is such a sweet time to be a free agent. The cap rose more than 7% over last year, when it increased more than 8% over 2015.

Remember the lockout year? After the 10-year collective bargaining agreement was struck, the cap remained essentially flat for a couple of years under \$121 million, when agents grumbled that they were operating under the worst markets since liberalized free agency came into existence.

The NFL Players Association defended the economics of the pact, maintaining that it would get better for players in ensuing years – which, of course, was of little consolation to older players nearing the end of their careers.

Four years ago, the cap was \$123 million. But look at it now. The cap, tied to league revenues that have soared to more than \$14 billion per year, has grown by \$44 million since 2013.

That's a big reason why the Saints will still have Fairley – who produced a career-high 6 ½ sacks in the first 16-game season of his career -- aligned next to last year's first-round pick, Sheldon Rankins, in the middle of the defensive front. The Miami Dolphins, meanwhile, hung onto wide receiver Kenny Stills, while the Indianapolis Colts keep tight end Jack Doyle.

But teams still must decide which players are worth keeping and which they should let walk.

Look at the New England Patriots. At the moment, they have officially re-signed only one player – safety Duron Harmon, with reports indicating defensive tackle Alan Branch also has an agreement in place – while linebacker Dont'a Hightower's status remains in limbo.

If the Patriots – so busy working the market from multiple angles – manage to keep Hightower, it might be one of the smoothest moves of all.

NFL free agency roundup: The latest from Day 3

By Staff

NFL.com

March 12, 2017

Former Cowboys safety J.J. Wilcox has found a new home.

The 26-year-old former third-round pick signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the team announced Saturday. NFL Network's Mike Garafolo reports it is a two-year deal for Wilcox, worth up to \$8.5 million, per a source.

Wilcox spent all four of his seasons in Dallas. Wilcox started only four games for the Cowboys last season after earning 29 starts the previous two years. The signing means the Buccaneers have likely moved on from safety Bradley McDougald, who is an unrestricted free agent.

The Bucs also announced they re-signed defensive tackle Sealver Siliga. Siliga joined Tampa Bay off waivers last season from the Seahawks. The 345-pounder played in six games for Tampa Bay, recording ten tackles and a sack.

Here are some other free-agent moves that have gone down Saturday:

1. Chicago is adding to its wide receiver corps. Kendall Wright is joining the Bears on a one-year, \$4 million deal, Rapoport reported. Wright was No. 59 on Around the NFL's Top 101 free agents list.

The Bears announced they have signed former Cardinals cornerback Marcus Cooper to a three-year deal.

2. Safety Daniel Sorensen's deal with the Chiefs is a four-year pact worth \$16 million with an additional \$2 million in incentives, Garafolo reported.

3. Former Jets quarterback Geno Smith is visiting the cross-town Giants on Saturday, Rapoport reported, per a source. Rapoport noted that Smith has requests for visits from others as well.

4. Wide receiver Andre Holmes is visiting the Lions on Sunday, Rapoport reported, per a source. Holmes spent the last four years in Oakland and saw his snaps limited, but three of his 14 catches on the year went for touchdowns. He is a possible depth addition, Rapoport added.

The Lions are signing former Cardinals tight end Darren Fells to a one-year deal worth \$1.5 million, Garafolo reported.

5. One day after signing Martellus Bennett, the Packers found themselves another free agent tight end. Green Bay announced Saturday that it has signed former Rams tight end Lance Kendricks.

6. Latavius Murray has some stops to make. The free-agent running back will visit the Jaguars on Monday and the Seahawks on Tuesday, Rapoport reported.

7. The Bills are interested in signing offensive tackle Andre Smith, Rapoport reported, per a source. Smith is entering his ninth year in the league and spent last season with the Vikings, starting four games.

8. The Jaguars continued to make moves. Former Cardinals guard Earl Watford will join Jacksonville on a two-year, \$6 million deal, Rapoport reported, and Audie Cole is coming in from Minnesota to add linebacker depth.

9. The Patriots made another addition, bringing in former Ravens defensive lineman Lawrence Guy in on a four-year contract worth up to \$20 million, Rapoport reported. Guy was ranked as the No. 55 free-agent.

10. The Broncos are signing former Bengals defensive tackle Domata Peko, Rapoport reported.

11. The Titans have agreed to terms with former Falcons kick returner Eric Weems.

Broncos sign Domata Peko

By Zac Jackson
Pro Football Talk
March 12, 2017

Longtime Bengals defensive tackle Domata Peko is signing with the Broncos, Mike Klis of News9 in Denver reported.

Peko, 32, has played his entire 11-year career in Cincinnati. He hasn't missed a game or a start since 2009.

Klis reported that Peko will get \$3.8 million guaranteed on a two-year deal that's worth as much as \$7.5 million.

Peko has 18.5 career sacks. He had a career-best five sacks in 2015 but didn't have any last season. The Bengals are going with a youth movement, while the Broncos hope Peko can fortify their defensive front. Peko's cousin, Kyle Peko, was a rookie nose tackle who played in one game for the Broncos last season.

Broncos add Zach Kerr to defensive line

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
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The Broncos doubled down on defensive line additions on Saturday.

The team signed former Bengals defensive tackle Domata Peko and then got deeper at the position by signing former Colt Zach Kerr. Mike Klis of KUSA reports that it is a two-year deal.

Kerr wasn't tendered by the Colts as a restricted free agent before the start of the league year, leaving him eligible to sign anywhere without any compensation or chance to match the offer. Kerr played in 36 games for Indianapolis over the last three years and has 64 tackles, 5.5 sacks and a forced fumble in those appearances.

Peko and Kerr will vie for snaps on a line that won't have Sylvester Williams in the mix now that Williams has signed with the Titans. The Broncos have also doubled up on offensive line additions as the early days of free agency have seen them focused on bulking up on both sides of the line.

How new Broncos offensive tackle Menelik Watson fell in love with football

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
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A decade ago, while still living in the soccer-mad British city of Manchester, football was a game that Menelik Watson watched from a distance. It was a game he dismissed, even though his friends thought he'd be a natural.

"They'd be like, 'Man, when you move to the States, you're going to play football,'" Watson recalled. "I'm like, 'I'm not playing football. No chance!'"

"I was one of those English guys who said, 'Oh, rugby's way tougher than football.'"

Not anymore. After a decade-long trek that crossed oceans and continents and took him through Poughkeepsie, N.Y. and Mission Viejo, Calif. on to Tallahassee, Fla. and finally to the NFL, football is Watson's true sporting love.

So fervent is Watson's desire to extract every drop out of his football life that he chose the Broncos in part because of their strength and conditioning staff, feeling that the methods utilized by Luke Richesson and his fellow strength coaches could help Watson avoid the injuries that have undercut his development during four seasons with the Raiders.

"I've had these [nagging injuries] that have set me back," Watson said. "We're trying to find the best situation moving forward where Menelik Watson can elongate his career and play football."

Watson's love of the sport wasn't love at first sight ... although when he first saw a game in person, he found himself intrigued.

That came while he was still playing basketball at Marist College. In 2010, he traveled to see a friend at Florida State.

"We were in the stands watching Florida State football. Everyone thought I was a recruit," Watson recalled. "And then, funny enough, two years later, I'm actually on the field. From sitting there watching versus BYU, and then two years later, I'm on the field and I can find the exact spot where I was sitting -- and I had no clue I was going to be there two years later."

"It's just crazy where life can take you."

In those two years between being a new fan and suiting up for the Seminoles in 2012, Watson transferred to Saddleback College in California, where he had to learn everything about the game of football -- even the basics of putting on the uniform.

"I didn't know what a girdle was. They taught me how to put a girdle on, how to put pads in, how to put shoulder pads on," Watson said. "I was just a blank canvas, and the first thing, I went out for defense and I had no clue what I was doing -- we were doing pursuit drills and I was like, 'Is this it?'"

Watson had to learn fast. He said he could only afford to pay for one year at the junior college, and he planned to graduate by then. If he was going to make any kind of impression to continue his first steps into football at a four-year university, he had to develop quickly.

Then Kyle Long, the current Bears Pro Bowler who was then a teammate at Saddleback, suggested Watson change sides.

"I remember walking off the first day, confused, [thinking] 'This might not happen, this might not happen,'" Watson remembered. "And he was like, 'Hey, come on offense tomorrow! It's easier!' I was like, 'All right.'"

One day later, Watson switched sides. And since Watson's background was in basketball, Long sought to put Watson's new job into the nomenclature of hoops.

"He said, 'Hey, man, the quarterback's the basket. Don't let [the defender] get to the basket," Watson said. "So from there, everything was pretty much [set]. I learned pass pro[tection] before I could run block."

With Long's words, a switch flipped. Watson showed enough physicality and promise for his journey to continue. He's still playing catch-up; the 2017 season will be just his seventh football campaign at any level. But his passion for the game is pure and powerful.

Yes, Watson still adores basketball. And as an ardent soccer fan, he lives and dies with Premier League powerhouse Manchester City, and attends matches whenever he gets back home.

But he wouldn't want to play any other sport.

"Without football, I'm a miserable person," he said, "and that's just the bottom line."

Three things to know about Menelik Watson

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
March 12, 2017

1. Football and Footy

Watson's UK background means he's heavily invested in the other football. And while his NFL allegiances have changed, his Premier League ties remain as strong as ever.

"Everybody who knows me knows it's Manchester City. That's my boys. I've been a 'Blue' since I can remember. They're doing pretty well. Sitting in the top four, trying to make the Champions League. I don't think we'll win the league this year, but we're doing pretty well. I got a chance to check out some games when I was home. That is always exciting."

His time playing soccer as a kid led directly to his transition across the pond later in life, he said.

"It helped a lot," Watson said. "I did a lot of things growing up as a kid. I was very active. Soccer, basketball, it just helped a lot. As a kid, I was a visual learner. I used to watch a lot of footwork. If someone was teaching me something, the first thing I do is watch the feet. Now when you go into football and I step onto the field, I'm an offensive lineman, a position that is unique in the technique that is not mimicked in anyway in any other sport.

"Which 300-pound man has to backpedal and stop another 300-pound man coming full speed? You've got to trust your feet. It's a big thing. When I was learning the sport, I was just observing the technique to pick it up quicker. Playing offensive line is a lot easier to juggling a soccer ball. It helped tremendously just building me as an athlete."

2. A (Kyle) Long shot

If not for former Chicago Bear Kyle Long, Watson may never have played professional football. Back when Watson was first learning the game, Long convinced him to go to Saddleback College. Watson had previously been at Marist College to play basketball, but he was ultimately too short to play power forward. When he showed up at Saddleback, Long took him under his wing. And for Watson, who had to learn how to put on a girdle and other parts of the uniform for the first time, Long was also instrumental in deciding which position he'd ultimately play.

After a day of struggling at defensive pursuit drills, Watson was stopped by Long as the two walked off the field.

"He was the one who convinced me to go there," Watson said, "and I remember walking off the first day, he was like, 'Come on offense tomorrow; it's easier.' I was like, 'All right.' So I went to the head coach and said, 'Hey, coach, can I try offense?' And he was like, 'Yeah, sure.' So I went over there."

As simple as that.

As for Long's advice to Watson about being an offensive lineman?

“The quarterback’s the basket,” Long told Watson. “Don’t let them get to the basket.”

3. What's in a nickname?

In Oakland, Watson had the nickname “Lennox” after three-time world heavyweight champion Lennox Lewis.

Watson couldn’t help but laugh when asked about the nickname at his media availability on Friday.

“When you throw your hands a lot, they want to compare you to somebody. I think I was a bit more fluid than Lennox [Lewis] though. I think I got a bit more of the jab on me.”

Three things to know about Ron Leary

By Aric DiLalla
DenverBroncos.com
March 12, 2017

1. Sock game = strong

Socks may have foretold Leary's ultimate destination on his free-agency venture. When he packed his luggage for what could have become a multi-stop tour, he threw in a pair of argyle socks. They just so happened to be orange, blue and white. He wore them Friday when he was introduced to the media and toured the facility. Though it wasn't planned, his sock game worked out just fine.

2. Like Mike?

Before Ron Leary became a starting NFL guard, he thrived as a basketball player at Baton Rouge (La.) Southern Lab. But that wouldn't last long.

"I was a basketball star," he said. "I felt like I was going to the next Mike [Jordan]. But I'm 6-3, 320 pounds, I wasn't going to be Michael Jordan (laughing). I put my hand in the dirt and I'm blessed it's been working for me."

Leary won't be returning to the court anytime soon, though.

"No, I got off the court. I hung the sneakers up and picked up some cleats."

3. Adding another Tiger

Leary joins quarterback Paxton Lynch among the Broncos' Memphis Tigers contingent. Though Leary never played with Lynch, who left school after his junior season, he kept track of the team's progress from afar.

"We weren't there at the same time, but as soon as [Lynch] got there, they started winning," Leary said. "He's a proven winner, man. We weren't winning too much when I was there, but he got there and they started winning. He's a great kid. I talked to him yesterday. He sent me a text just welcoming me to the family. He's a good guy. I'm happy for him. He's going to get better with progress, with time. I'm looking forward to seeing him grow."

Denver Broncos Cheerleaders recount hike up Mt. Kilimanjaro

By Staff

DenverBroncos.com

March 12, 2017

Gioia Bartalo and Romi Bean recently returned from a trip to Tanzania to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. Bean capped off her Denver Broncos Cheerleading career with the hike, while Bartalo will audition again in the coming weeks. Their trip, which spanned seven days on the mountain, was a far cry from their normal interactions together on the sideline of Sports Authority Field at Mile High.

Now that they're back from half a world away, they decided to share their story:

Gioia: The whole thing began when I moved to Colorado from Florida three years ago, right after I graduated college. I started hiking the 14ers out here and just got totally addicted to the feeling of summiting the mountain and standing on top of it after everything you go through to get there.

Last year I watched the movie "Everest", and was opened up to the idea of the seven summits. So I went home and I started researching and I was like, "Well, I can't start with Everest, but I can start with Mt. Kilimanjaro." And I got so obsessed with the thought of climbing this mountain in Africa and seeing it in person and standing on top of it.

I knew I just needed to find an adventure buddy that was crazy enough to go along with me on the journey. So I talked to my teammate and my good friend Romi who tends to say yes to my spontaneous adventures. She said she was down and she was up for the adventure and ready to stand on top of this mountain with me and we kind of got started from there.

Romi: Initially, honestly, Gioia said she's already wanted to do this, do I want to climb this mountain, and I just kind of said yes, like when someone says, "Hey, do you want to hang out on Saturday night?" Everybody said yes just kind of half-heartedly.

I was like, "Sure, why not," but I didn't really think it was going to happen. I didn't really think we were going to do it. There were a couple other people that also said sure, and sure enough they ended up kind of bailing out, so I was left as the last man standing and we really did it.

Gioia: Initially we started talking about it a year ago and all I needed was the, "Yes, I'm in. I'm up for the adventure, and I'll go with you." And then the season started and everything kind of gets put on the back burner because obviously it's football over everything. Once the season was over, we actually didn't even book our flights until late December. So we talked about it for a year and then didn't make it happen until about two months before we actually had to be in Africa.

Romi: We're always training in season, so I was in really good shape because we just have to be during the season. But in terms of actual mountains, I had a little bit of a mild panic attack on the plane ride out there. It kind of hit me. I was like, "I climbed one 14er last year. Gioia's climbed 10, I think. The last time I went camping, I think was sixth grade. She goes camping like once a month."

Gioia: I don't think that either one of us really trained as we should have for this mountain, because we kind of did rely on that. During the season, we're working out every single day. I kind of relied on the fact that I love the mountains and I'm in the mountains every weekend either skiing or hiking or trail running. So I figured, okay, well, I spent my time at 10,000 feet over the weekend so that has to count for something as far as training goes.

Romi: I realized on the plane, "What am I doing? Can I really do this? How am I going to camp for seven days and climb a mountain in Africa when really I've trained in the gym and in the dance studio?"

Then I tried to kind of use all that to challenge myself. I was like, "Well, I'm going to do it. And I'm going to show that I can do it." I don't know if it was the will of my mind that got me through, but I think it helped.

Gioia: We had our Junior Denver Broncos Cheerleaders end of the season show on Saturday, Feb. 11, and we flew out the next morning. So it was just as soon as we were done with our season commitments, we were on a plane. The travel was long, but once we got there, it was unreal.

We landed and you could see the mountain in the distance. You could just see the shadow of it. I thought it was clouds at first. Our guide picked us up from the airport and he pointed while we were driving back into town and he said, "Do you see that shadow over there?" And I said, "Yeah, the clouds up there, those look cool." And he said, "No that's the mountain you're going to climb."

It was that breathtaking when you saw it. We had a day to acclimate to the time change and that whole time we were really excited to be in Africa. I had never travelled to Africa before, but I was filled with anxiety and just thinking about the climb. I just wanted to start it.

Romi: I felt like both Gioia and I were in great shape and could handle the rigors of the mountain as athletes. At the end of Day 3, we were both so sore and all of the fatigue kicked in, and it was a mental struggle of having four more days. That was kind of the first time outside of the plane ride where I was like, "Can I do this? Can my body do this? What if I can't go up and have to go down?" All of those fears.

Gioia: It was way more mentally and emotionally challenging because it's all a mind game. It's all mental. The night before I summited the mountain, I sat down in my tent and I thought to myself, "What am I doing? Why do I think I can do this? I'm from Florida. I think I'm big shot Colorado girl now, but I'm still from sea level. Why do I think I can stand at 19,000 feet?" And it was just all mental. And it took me writing everything out and acknowledging my thoughts and realizing, "No, if I can get through the Denver Broncos Cheerleaders final audition week, I can climb this mountain."

Romi: You had to address those fears. That was kind of a challenge that I think most people don't have to face all the time because you don't want to face. So I think that part was amazing. I didn't want to face it, but each time I did, I felt like I got stronger. It felt so good on the way up to the summit, I think because it had been such a mental mind game the whole time.

Gioia: It was very physically challenging, but I think that I did have an advantage because I'm in the mountains so often here. So I think that people coming from sea level or people that don't explore the mountains every weekend would definitely have a bigger physical struggle with it.

It's way different than a game-day routine, because game-day routines are a minute. So you will be out of breath after that minute, but then you can regain your composure and get back into the performance. This climb, it felt like, for the final summit attempt at least, you couldn't catch your breath. You are just continuously out of breath until you got back down.

Romi: Going up to the summit, I was thinking, "Every day on this trip, I've been like this is unbelievable, I don't think anything is going to top this." ... I kept thinking, "How can anything top this?" And when we got to the summit, it topped it all. We really felt like we were on top of the world. It was an amazing moment to share up there.

Gioia: It was overwhelming. The thought of standing on top of these mountains and experiencing things that other people will only dream of, that's what you know, keeps me going. I'd had dreams of that moment. I'd researched what the sign would look like from a distance. What the trail was going to be like on the way up so I knew exactly where I was going to be the whole time and how far away I was going to be from that goal.

It took way longer than I thought. We finally reached the ridgeline and then we had to walk for about another hour to get to the actual summit sign. Me and Romi kept looking at each other like, are we ever going to get there or are we just going to continue to dwindle our oxygen down. But when we finally saw the sign, Romi and I were the first people to summit that day and there was nothing like it.

You could see the shadow of the sign in the distance and the sun was starting to rise. The clouds were lighting up. It looked like the world was on fire. At that moment, I thought that I'd never experienced anything better. Nobody could touch me in that moment.

Romi: I feel like I was so happy that I got to do it before my tenure as a cheerleader ended, because for me this will be a piece of being a DBC. I brought the Broncos flag up there and we did that. Not just because we're fans, but because we're cheerleaders and we love this team so much.

So it did feel like that was kind of a capping off point. And I was doing that while I was still a cheerleader. So for me, there was a lot of great value in that sense and also it was a great way to finish it off, because it showed me that you can always find a bigger mountain. It's hard to leave cheerleading for all of us, but for me, I'm very attached to the Broncos. I've grown up on this team, so there's this feeling of loss a little bit.

Doing something like this where you feel accomplished was really great because it reminded me to take everything I've learned from the Broncos and put that into whatever the next chapter is.

Gioia: The one thing for me that was a really big takeaway heading into auditions less than a month later, is that you are capable of doing it. You have the strength and you have the power and you have the resilience and nobody can take that away from you. If you think that you can do something, you can.

So it's kind of great to go into auditioning for my fourth season as a Denver Broncos Cheerleader knowing that I am good enough and I can make this team. All it takes is a little extra hard work and going slow, appreciating the moment and using your breath.

As soon as we got back into town and into wifi, the first thing I did was look up the next step of the seven summits. Everest is still out there. I've got to find the money tree for that one, but I have been

exploring the option of Mt. Elbrus in Russia next year, maybe Denali in the near future, so yes, I'm on to the next adventure already.

Romi: It's probably going to be the same thing. I'll be like, "Yeah, sure! I'm coming along!" And sure enough, I won't prepare, and I'll come along.

These quotes have been edited for clarity.