

OT Donald Stephenson restructures contract with Broncos

By Nicki Jhabvala
Denver Post
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Broncos offensive tackle Donald Stephenson agreed to restructure his contract for the 2017 season, according to two NFL sources. Stephenson's \$4 million salary for 2017 was to be fully guaranteed Monday. Instead, \$2 million will be guaranteed and the other \$2 million can be earned if he makes the 53-man roster.

Stephenson signed a three-year, \$14 million contract with the Broncos last March after he spent four years with the Chiefs. But he struggled in his first season in Denver, and fell in and out of the starting rotation because of injury and performance.

The right tackle position, manned by Stephenson and Ty Sambrailo, was the Broncos' biggest weakness on a line that struggled with cohesion in general. The two combined to allow 71 quarterback pressures, 10 sacks and 12 quarterback hits, according to Pro Football Focus, which ranked the Broncos' offensive line 24th in the NFL in 2016.

9News first reported Stephenson's revised contract.

The addition of Menelik Watson in free agency gives the Broncos four offensive tackles, with Stephenson, Sambrailo and Michael Schofield. The incumbent three have had experience inside at guard, if the Broncos need to shuffle them.

But the free-agency pickups and retention of Stephenson on a revised deal still leaves the Broncos without a true left tackle to take the place of Russell Okung, who defected for the Chargers in free agency after the Broncos declined to engage his contract option for another four years.

The Broncos could continue to search for help on the open market, or consider trading for help. They could also turn to the draft, where they have 10 picks and the No. 20 selection in the first round. The tackle free-agent market and draft class is weak in general, and much weaker than it was a few days ago, before some of the top free agents signed new deals.

Broncos, Stephenson rework contract

By Mike Klis

9News

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Donald Stephenson agreed to restructure his contract, a transaction that greatly enhances the offensive tackle's chances of sticking with the Denver Broncos in 2017.

The team's starting right tackle last year, Stephenson essentially lost that job when the Broncos signed free-agent Menelik Watson away from the Oakland Raiders on Friday.

But the Broncos still value Stephenson's athleticism and versatility and worked out a compromise. After making \$6 million in signing bonus and salary last year through the leverage of free agency, Stephenson was scheduled to have his \$4 million salary guaranteed against injury on Monday.

Instead, Stephenson will now receive a \$2 million full guarantee, with the other \$2 million to become guaranteed if he makes the Broncos' 53-man roster.

The final year of his contract – a non-guaranteed \$4 million salary for the 2018 season – remains intact.

With Watson on the right side, don't be surprised if Stephenson gets reps at left tackle. The Broncos could get a left tackle in the draft, either with their No. 20 overall pick in the first round or No. 51 selection in the second.

As their roster currently consists, the Broncos have four offensive tackles in Watson, Stephenson, 2015 second-round draft pick Ty Sambrailo and 2014 third-round draft pick Michael Schofield.

Schofield starting 16 games, counting the postseason, at right tackle in 2015 and 16 games at right guard last season.

Sambrailo battled injuries the past two years. He has played left tackle, right guard and right tackle.

The top left tackles in the draft are Wisconsin's Ryan Ramczyk, Utah's Garrett Bolles and possibly Alabama's Cam Robinson, who may be more of a right tackle, and possibly Bucknell's Julie'n Davenport.

Broncos' offseason moves make OL coach Jeff Davidson a busy man

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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It's clear the Denver Broncos think a lot of new offensive line coach Jeff Davidson because they have piled plenty on his offseason plate so far.

There is no question the Broncos' biggest positional makeover will come along the offensive line in the weeks and months to come, given there could be as many as three new starters overall and as many four different players in different positions if Max Garcia moves from left guard to right guard. And if the change in personnel isn't enough, coach Vance Joseph and offensive coordinator Mike McCoy each have said they'd like an offensive line that can play different styles when needed.

The Broncos used a zone-blocking scheme for the majority of the time in Gary Kubiak's time as coach, and they could also use a more traditional gap scheme, in which linemen block specific defenders on each play rather than the defenders who are in a specific area.

"We're hoping to do both," Joseph said. "... When you're doing both, it helps you on game day. If you're doing only one thing, teams will wire in and scheme against what you're doing. If you're doing both gap schemes and zone schemes, it makes you tough to defend."

The offseason of change got going early on as Davidson and the Broncos' coaching staff didn't even make it two weeks after their arrival before they had to make a change. Initially, John Benton was hired as Davidson's assistant offensive line coach, but shortly after his arrival to the Broncos, he was then hired by Kyle Shanahan to be the San Francisco 49ers' offensive line coach.

Joseph and Davidson hired Chris Strausser as the offensive line assistant in late February. The Broncos then made the position the biggest priority in free agency, signing guard Ronald Leary in free agency's opening day on Thursday, then tackle Menelik Watson on free agency's second day on Friday.

Over the weekend, the Broncos also re-worked tackle Donald Stephenson's contract after a frustrating 2016 season for both him and the team. Stephenson did not give the Broncos what they had hoped as the right tackle was one of their biggest signings in free agency a year ago.

He was set to have his \$4 million base salary guaranteed Monday, but that put his roster spot in question, so he agreed to a re-worked deal that guaranteed \$2 million of his base salary Monday. Stephenson, however, would be looking at a backup role if Watson is considered the team's right tackle.

Add in the fact that center Matt Paradis, the one "given" on the offensive line, having played every snap of the last two seasons, is recovering from offseason surgery on each hip.

Davidson will have plenty of work to do and decisions to make in the weeks and months to come.

"I think our offensive line does need to play better," McCoy said. "Our offense will go as far as our offensive line will take them."

The Broncos also still have an opening at left tackle. With the new additions, a possible re-made look could be Watson at right tackle, Garcia at right guard, Paradis back at center and Leary at left guard.

The draft is thin at potential rookie starters at left tackle -- it might require the Broncos to use their first-round pick to get a walk-in starter as a rookie -- so if they Broncos select a developmental player there, they might need a veteran tackle to bridge the gap until a younger player is ready. The list of potential starters remaining in free agency, however, has shortened significantly in recent days. Some veteran former starters remain, but those unsigned players are largely in the over-30 group, led by Ryan Clady and Sebastian Vollmer.

There have been reports Vollmer might consider retirement. Clady has had some significant injury issues in recent seasons, including seven games missed last season with the New York Jets with a torn rotator cuff to go with all of the 2015 season with the Broncos with a torn ACL. Clady also played just two games in the 2013 season because of a foot injury.

In the end Elway summed it all up with: "We're going to look everywhere" and that "Jeff Davidson will do a good job there."

Broncos rework Donald Stephenson's deal to keep him in mix

By Jeff Legwold
ESPN.com
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Since the free-agency market officially opened Thursday afternoon, the Denver Broncos have done virtually all of their work on the offensive and defensive lines. That work continued through the weekend when they signed two defensive linemen (Domata Peko and Zach Kerr) and made a decision on right tackle Donald Stephenson.

Stephenson's base salary of \$4 million for the 2017 season was set to become guaranteed Monday, but if he was released before then the Broncos would have owed him nothing. After the acquisition on Friday of another right tackle candidate, Menelik Watson, Stephenson's roster spot was in some jeopardy.

But Stephenson agreed to a restructured deal this weekend that makes \$2 million of his salary guaranteed, and he will have to make the 53-man roster to earn the other \$2 million. In 2016, Stephenson started 12 games, playing in 13. He dealt with a calf injury at one point and briefly lost his job because of performance.

Right tackle was consistently a trouble spot last season for the Broncos. Stephenson tied with Russell Okung for the team lead in penalties (11), and opposing defensive coaches repeatedly said they thought they could create consistent pressure in the pass rush against Stephenson or his replacement, Ty Sambrailo.

John Elway, the Broncos' executive vice president of football operations/general manager, hinted in recent weeks that a move could be coming on Stephenson. Asked recently if he believed Stephenson's contract or roster spot needed to be addressed, Elway said: "You keep all those options open, right? Right now, he's ours and we've got our starting right tackle back from last year."

After Denver's signing of Watson and guard Ronald Leary, there is still an opening at left tackle. Stephenson started 23 games at left tackle during his time with the Kansas City Chiefs, but the Broncos didn't consider him for that role when they signed him to a \$14 million deal a year ago.

The Broncos have a new offensive line coach, Jeff Davidson, so it remains to be seen how he wants to deploy his players in the lineup. The Broncos begin on-field workouts in May.

Zach Kerr a low-risk signing for a potential nose tackle

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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The Denver Broncos' chief football decision-maker, John Elway, had said he was interested in talking to nose tackle Sylvester Williams about re-signing with the team because nose tackle was a position of need in the team's free-agency plan. But Elway was also interested in talking to others about filling the job.

The Broncos' first on-site visit in free agency went to Earl Mitchell and the team negotiated with Chris Baker before those two players signed with the 49ers and Buccaneers, respectively. Williams signed with Tennessee, where he got a better deal than what the Broncos would have offered.

That put Zach Kerr in line for the Broncos this weekend.

Terms: Two years

Top 150 ranking: Not ranked

Grade: Another B for the Broncos. Kerr is not a marquee signing for the defense, but he is a young player who still has room to grow -- he'll turn 27 in August. He's started 36 games in the last three seasons, and he had one of his 2.5 sacks in 2016 in a Week 2 game against the Broncos.

What it means: With Williams' departure, Kerr is in line to compete for snaps at nose tackle on early downs for the Broncos. The Broncos need more physical play up front; too often opposing offenses were able to keep the Broncos away from the most favorable pass-rush situations because they were able to move the ball well in the run game on first and second downs. The Broncos hope the signings of Kerr and Domata Peko remedy that.

What's the risk: This is a low-risk signing. Kerr is a young player who has largely been healthy in his career. He was a restricted free agent and was not tendered an offer by the Indianapolis Colts. The Broncos have a player who could improve on already solid performance.

Domata Peko should help Broncos beef up run defense

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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The Denver Broncos have faced Domata Peko plenty over the past decade and believe the veteran defensive lineman has enough left in his football tank to help the Broncos repair their defense's only significant flaw from this past season.

Peko, 32, is a physical presence and should help the Broncos' defense -- which finished No. 4 overall, No. 4 in scoring defense and No. 1 against the pass in 2016 -- improve its work against the run, where it finished 28th in the league.

Terms: 2 years, \$7.5 million

Top 150 ranking: Not ranked

Grade: If Peko maintains his career profile and remains a reliable player, this is a solid B. He isn't a glamorous signing, but he's a highly productive, unselfish player who has seemingly always been in the lineup in his career. He'll turn 33 in November, so he's a little outside the age range that John Elway, the Broncos' executive vice president of football operations/general manager, usually likes to maintain in free agency. But Peko is one of the most reliable players in the league, having played in 16 games in 10 of his 11 previous seasons. He's started all 16 games in each of his past seven seasons.

What it means: Two Broncos defensive linemen -- Sylvester Williams and Vance Walker -- were unrestricted free agents, so it is a position of need. But Peko is just the kind of signing Elway likes to make after the initial wave of free agency has passed -- a proven starter who isn't signed in the initial frenzy when the market opens. Peko is a technically sound player who, season after season, has done the little things up front that any defense needs to control the line of scrimmage. Peko could play the left defensive end in the Broncos' 3-4 front or move inside to the nose tackle spot in the team's specialty packages in long-yardage down-and-distance situations.

What's the risk: Peko's history minimizes concerns over his age and the mileage on his physical odometer. He has played many high-impact snaps at the point of attack. But while 30 is just a number for most of the rest of the workaday world, Peko's age is the only reason to pause at this. But again, his production and durability to this point make him as safe a financial bet as a 32-year-old player can be in the NFL.

Broncos continue to shop for big guys in free agency

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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It was just a punchline offered in passing on Friday. But as the Denver Broncos worked on their free-agency plan through the weekend, it continues to be the theme of the team's offseason work.

John Elway, the Broncos' executive vice president of football operations/general manager, was asked if he planned to talk to any prospective free agents who weighed less than 300 pounds. He laughed and said "no."

He was joking, but only a little, as the Broncos' work in the open market -- including the addition of defensive tackle Domata Peko and nose tackle Zach Kerr on Sunday -- continues to be a football version of a really big and tall shop. The Broncos have thus far reeled in guard Ronald Leary, tackle Menelik Watson, Peko and Kerr.

Peko and Kerr agreed to terms this weekend. It's certainly no shock, because Elway has spoken often about "attitude" and cranking up the Broncos' ability to be physical on both lines after the team didn't make the playoffs this past season, Denver's first postseason miss since 2010.

Peko, 32, is a bit of a departure from Elway's preferred profile in free agency, but he has been both highly productive and durable in his career. Peko has started 16 games in each of the past seven seasons, and has played in 16 games in 10 of his previous 11 seasons. At 325 pounds, he can play the power end in the Broncos' 3-4 front on defense or move inside as a nose tackle in some of the team's specialty looks.

Kerr is a 334-pounder who will play nose tackle in the team's base defense since nose tackle Sylvester Williams departed for the Tennessee Titans.

The Broncos eyed plenty of candidates for the nose tackle job in free agency, meeting with Earl Mitchell, who signed with the San Francisco 49ers, and Chris Baker, who signed with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Overall, the Broncos were on the hunt for physical players in the defensive front who can improve their run defense -- they were 28th against the run last season, allowing 130.3 yards per game -- and eat up some blockers to free the team's edge rushers, especially Von Miller.

Miller did not have a sack in the team's last four games in 2016, facing a steady diet of double- and triple-teams as the Broncos struggled to beat single blocks in the middle of the formation.

That helps explain the Broncos' approach to the open market thus far, as Elway has said the offensive and defensive lines are among the priorities. With power players Leary and Watson on board along the offensive line, Elway said they're "exactly the kind of player we were looking for."

Donald Stephenson restructures contract, provides depth at tackle spot

By Troy Renck
KMGH
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The Broncos found a compromise, but not a solution.

On Sunday, Donald Stephenson restructured his contract, guaranteeing him \$2 million, and an additional \$2 million if he makes the 53-man roster, according to an NFL source. He provides depth at the tackle positions after losing his job at the right tackle spot in his first season in Denver.

However, there remains a strong probability the Broncos' starting left tackle is not yet on the roster given the team's 10 draft picks and the possibility, if unlikely, of a trade. Denver prioritized reshaping the personality of its offensive line this offseason. The Broncos signed Cowboys guard Ronald Leary, a noted tough guy, and right tackle Menelik Watson. Watson, who must show he can stay healthy, symbolized the change when he boasted, "If the (offensive line) is getting into something, I am getting into something. If they are throwing punches, I am throwing punches." Leary summed up it thusly when talking about the work of the Cowboys' line a year ago: "Once everybody decided that we were going to be bullies, that made it a lot easier. It becomes fun."

In Stephenson's case, he never gained traction last season after suffering a calf injury during the second game. Signed for his comfort in the zone block system, Stephenson started, but couldn't hold the job. Ty Sambrailo replaced him at New Orleans and held the No. 1 spot against Kansas City a week later until Justin Houston turned him into a human turnstile. Stephenson returned and held the spot for the final month.

However, Stephenson's \$4 million contract brought speculation he would be cut in advance of Monday's deadline to guarantee a spot. The Broncos worked out a way to keep him in the competition which includes, for now, Ty Sambrailo and Michael Schofield.

There is also optimism within the Broncos building that new offensive line coach Jeff Davidson and a return to a power blocking scheme can accelerate improvement.

Nothing has changed in the Tony Romo drama. The Broncos are not interested in trading for the Dallas Cowboys quarterback, but are expected to have interest if he's released. The Broncos' offseason additions have left them room to make another significant move.

Texas Standoff over Tony Romo

By Woody Paige

Colorado Springs Gazette

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Dudley Do Wrong of the Dallas Cowboys has backed himself into an isolated corner of his own Jerry World, and he can't escape until he's utterly humiliated.

Day 4: Tony Romo Held Hostage.

How much longer before Jar Jar blinks?

Perhaps Pro Football Hall of Fame officials should apologize and announce their accounting firm made a mistake by giving them the wrong envelope, and that Pat Bowlen actually belongs in, and Jerry Jones is way out.

At the recent NFL Combine, Jones, in addressing the Romo Matter with a group of writers, said the two "will work in the best way we can in the mutual interest for Tony and the Dallas Cowboys" and "when you've got a situation like we've got, we'll do the do-right rule."

It was implied that if released, Romo wouldn't come back to haunt his old team with another division team such as Washington, and the owner wouldn't trade his quarterback to a franchise for which he didn't care to play. The reports out of the Cowboys on Wednesday praised The Jer for electing to "do right" in letting Tony go so he and his eventual team - the Broncos or the Texans - quickly would settle a contract and make plans for moving ahead.

Romo taped a homemade video for Instagram saying goodbye to the Cowboys and thanking everyone in Dallas.

Whoa, though!

On Thursday afternoon, when the official phase of free agency began, Jones called a reverse and, with a tightened face (aided by unnatural measures), that he wasn't releasing Romo.

Rather than following his own do-right rule, Jones decided he could coerce the Texans and the Broncos into bidding-war trade, and to heck with Romo and his feelings.

If Jones hadn't performed his Texas Hold-Em up medicine minstrel trick, the Broncos probably would already have reached an agreement with Romo in John Elway's latest "Plan A." The Broncos would sign Romo to a three-year contract, laden with incentive clauses and bonuses, and trade Trevor Siemian to the Jets to acquire another mid-draft choice.

In the meantime, baseball guy Paul DePodesta, of "Moneyball," who is the chief strategy officer of Browns football, pulled off a basketball deal - basically buying a second-right draft pick (circumventing NFL rules) by taking on Brock Osweiler's \$16 million salary for 2017 - as a prelude to dumping the former Broncos' quarterback.

Momentarily, it appeared that Houston had taken the lead in the Romo race.

Jones was grinning like an Arkansas hog in slop, thinking he had two cubic rubes. Except that Elway has said privately that the Romo Matter wouldn't be addressed unless he was a free agent - so his contract could be reworked (lowered). Then, it became clear that the Texans wouldn't trade for Romo, either, choosing to wait until he is unrestrained.

Romo went off Instagram and into seclusion, and Mr. Do Wrong, whose gambit didn't succeed, hasn't been heard from since.

Apparently, Jones will keep Romo for a while, hoping Houston GM Rick Smith, a one-time media relations assistant for the Broncos (who I must have demanded get me a diet soda or stats), or Elway will flutter their eyelids. But I know Elway has a Tommy Petty hard-headedness ("I won't back down"), and I've been assured by Houston folks that the Texans are not "all hat, no cattle."

There is the side topic regarding the two franchises. Last year the Texans thought they beat the Broncos in the Brock battle. Turned out, the Texans were incorrect.

And, now, the Broncos have signed another Cowboys castoff - guard Ronald Leary. At one point, the Broncos took in DeMarcus Ware, who had been tossed to the curb by Jones. And look how that turned out. (The Cowboys apparently just lost another valuable starting offensive lineman. Veteran tackle Doug Free says he is retiring.)

The Broncos haven't made much of a dent in free agency - losing out on Calais Campbell (who followed Thomas Wolfe's advice and decided he can't come home again) and several other targeted players who chose money over love, happiness and Super Bowl.

The Texans haven't signed one free agent, as three starters bolted.

Elway trumpeted he had "no Plan B" when Peyton Manning was persuaded to join the Broncos. Elway may need plans B, C and Z in the next two months. The Broncos still need a defensive end, a nose tackle, a tight end, a right tackle, a left tackle, an inside linebacker and a backup cornerback.

And, indubitably, there's the Texas Standoff over Romo.

While the Patriots become more formidable by doing a lot right in the past few days.

Free Agency's First Days: Making Sense of All the Movement

By Andy Benoit
MMQB
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AFC EAST

BUFFALO BILLS

Added: FB Patrick DiMarco (ATL), DB Micah Hyde (GB), FB Mike Tolbert (CAR), G Vlad Ducasse (BAL)

Lost: CB Stephon Gilmore (NE), WR Marquise Goodwin (SF), WR Robert Woods (LAR)

Re-signed: OLB Lorenzo Alexander, OT Jordan Mills

Gilmore wasn't worth to the Bills what he's worth to the Patriots because the Bills, under new head coach Sean McDermott, will employ a lot of traditional zone coverages. (The Patriots, on the other hand, play more man-to-man.) The more interesting move is adding not one, but two fullbacks—and probably the best two from the NFC last year. DiMarco will help on base downs; Tolbert will help on passing downs. QB Tyrod Taylor is not a fast field-reader and needs extra time in the pocket. Having a third-down back with Tolbert's blocking prowess will help.

MIAMI DOLPHINS

Added: S Nate Allen (OAK), LB Lawrence Timmons (PIT), DE William Hayes (LAR), TE Anthony Fasano (TEN), TE Julius Thomas (trade from JAX)

Lost: TE Dion Sims (CHI)

Re-signed: DE Andre Branch, S Reshad Jones, WR Kenny Stills, DT Earl Mitchell (SF), OT Branden Albert (trade to JAX)

Shoddy inside linebacker play was a big issue for this defense last season. Timmons gives them an attack-minded veteran. He's a more instinctive player than intellectual one; it may take him some time to adjust to new surroundings. Fortunately, new D coordinator Matt Burke will run a traditional zone scheme, which any veteran, and especially one who still moves as well as Timmons, should pick up smoothly.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

Added: CB Stephon Gilmore (BUF), TE Dwayne Allen (trade from IND), WR Brandin Cooks (trade from NO), DE Lawrence Guy (BAL), DE Kony Ealy (trade from CAR)

Lost: TE Martellus Bennett (GB), CB Logan Ryan (TEN), DE Jabaal Sheard (IND)

Re-signed: DT Alan Branch, S Duron Harmon

Adding the quick, speedy Cooks makes this a scarier offense than it was a year ago—especially when you consider that Rob Gronkowski (if healthy) will also be impacting safeties in the middle of the field. That said, you have to question paying Dwayne Allen \$5 million over the next two years rather than choosing to pay Bennett, who signed with Green Bay for an average of \$7 million a year. Allen is flexible as a move-blocker, but he isn't a major receiving threat from the slot or especially out wide. He doesn't provide as much formational diversity as Bennett would have.

NEW YORK JETS

Added: OT Kelvin Beachum (JAX)

Lost: WR Brandon Marshall (NYG), C Nick Mangold (released), OT Ryan Clady (released), CB Darrelle Revis (released)

The Jets still haven't found someone to replace Revis. That's a concern because Todd Bowles can't run his full blitz-intensive system without a top-shelf cover corner.

AFC NORTH

BALTIMORE RAVENS

Added: S Tony Jefferson (ARI), RB Danny Woodhead (SD/LAC)

Lost: FB Kyle Juszczyk (SF), RT Ricky Wagner (DET), FS Lardarius Webb (released), OLB Elvis Dumervil (released)

Re-signed: DT Brandon Williams

The addition of Jefferson is offset a little by the release of Webb. Yes, Webb's release created \$5.5 million in cap space, but he had blossomed into one of the rangier free safeties in the sport. His cornerbacking background also provided the unique flexibility to drop down and cover the slot. Having a safety trio of him, Jefferson and Eric Weddle would have allowed for a scheme with almost no boundaries on its flexibility and disguises. But money was limited, and adding Jefferson certainly makes for more schematic diversity. Overall, still not a bad move by the Ravens.

CINCINNATI BENGALS

Added: none

Lost: LB Karlos Dansby (ARI), LT Andrew Whitworth (LAR), G Kevin Zeitler (CLE), DT Domata Peko (DEN)

Re-signed: CB Dre Kirkpatrick, WR Brandon LaFell

On the dark side: yes, Whitworth and Zeitler were the only two consistent pieces on an offensive line that surprisingly struggled throughout 2016. If callow third-year tackles Cedric Ogbuehi and Jake Fisher

don't take big steps forward, it will be difficult for Cincy's entire offense to function. On the bright side: Kirkpatrick and LaFell were two players the Bengals needed to retain, and it wasn't a sure thing that they would. Kirkpatrick is long and flexible. LaFell is not a dynamic weapon, but he's revered as a leader and, within the context of Cincy's scheme, can produce on in-breaking routes (like skinny posts and slants).

CLEVELAND BROWNS

Added: WR Kenny Britt (LAR), C J.C. Tretter (GB), G Kevin Zeitler (CIN), QB Brock Osweiler (trade from Houston)

Lost: WR Terrelle Pryor (WAS)

So you essentially pay \$16 million for what's likely to be a late second-round pick in 2018 as part of the Osweiler trade, but you won't pay half of that to retain an uber-athletic 27-year-old wide receiver whom you invested significant man hours and resources in developing? Unless the Browns know something about Pryor that we don't, letting him walk to Washington for \$8 million is as dumb as it gets. He has the raw talent to be a true No. 1. Maybe he's still a ways off from that, but at the start of last season he was a guy who could only line up wide and run post patterns. By the end of the season he was lining up in the slot and running nearly a full route tree. Such swift, meaningful development over the course of a few months is extremely rare. Cleveland did the hard work for Washington.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS

Added: none

Lost: LB Lawrence Timmons (MIA), WR Markus Wheaton (CHI)

Re-signed: QB Landry Jones, TE David Johnson

The Steelers have never been big players in free agency, which means that for the second straight year they'll restock their defense by drafting guys and—this is the notable part—playing them right away. The positions of need: slot corner and edge rusher.

AFC SOUTH

HOUSTON TEXANS

Added: none

Lost: QB Brock Osweiler (trade to CLE), CB A.J. Bouye (JAX), S Quintin Demps (CHI), OLB John Simon (IND)

Bouye is gone, but third-year pro Kevin Johnson is expected back healthy. Johnson has outstanding transitional movement skills. Demps is gone, but undrafted third-year pro Corey Moore came on strong late last season, improving markedly in coverage. The unheralded Simon is gone, but this versatile front seven will get back a certain guy named J.J. Watt. Consider this one of the rare instances where a defense loses three quality starters, makes no additions and is still poised to maintain its standing near the top of the league.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

Added: DE Jabaal Sheard (NE), OLB John Simon (HOU)

Lost: TE Dwayne Allen (trade to NE), S Mike Adams (CAR)

Re-signed: TE Jack Doyle

No team played with two tight ends as often as Indy last year. Rob Chudzinski has always been one of the most innovative offensive coordinators in football when it comes to multi-tight end sets. Allen was expendable because he's basically a poor man's Doyle. Which is to say, he's more of an H-back than a receiver. Expect the Colts to draft a flexible pass-catching tight end.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

Added: CB A.J. Bouye (HOU), DE Calais Campbell (ARI), SS Barry Church (DAL), G Earl Watford (ARI), LT Branden Albert (trade from MIA)

Lost: CB Prince Amukamara (CHI), OT Kelvin Beachum (NYJ), SS Jonathan Cyprien (TEN), G Luke Joeckel, TE Julius Thomas (trade to MIA)

It's chic to facetiously declare the Jaguars back-to-back champions of the offseason, but boy, at some point the talent they've accumulated on defense (last year they signed DT Malik Jackson and S Tashaun Gipson and drafted CB Jalen Ramsey and LB Myles Jack) can't help but translate into on-field success. This was already a better defense than people realized in 2016. With Bouye opposite Ramsey, it now has the ability to play press-man on the perimeter, which will give dimension to the zone foundation of D coordinator Todd Wash with Campbell paired with Jackson, there are two imposing defensive linemen who can line up anywhere and penetrate gaps or clog them.

TENNESSEE TITANS

Added: SS Johnathan Cyprien (JAX), CB Logan Ryan (TEN), DT Sylvester Williams (DEN)

Lost: G Chance Warmack (PHI), TE Anthony Fasano (MIA), WR Kendall Wright (CHI)

Defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau has quietly shifted his philosophy in this, the eighth decade of his life. As last season progressed, LeBeau called more and more man coverage. The reason was twofold. One: The Titans were young at defensive back, and many of their players struggled to digest the complexity of the matchup coverage rules that come with LeBeau's zone scheme. But two: LeBeau felt that his blitz packages, which featured five or six rushers who were almost always disguising their looks before the snap and criss-crossing paths to the quarterback after it, demanded more press-man on the back end. Adding Ryan will help in this department, but don't be surprised if the Titans still draft one or two corners in the first few rounds.

AFC WEST

DENVER BRONCOS

Added: G Ronald Leary (DAL), OT Menelik Watson (OAK), DT Domata Peko (CIN), DT Zach Kerr (IND)

Lost: LT Russell Okung (LAC), DT Sylvester Williams (TEN)

New players do not mean a better offensive line. In fact, the Broncos might be worse up front than they were. Yes, Leary was outstanding last season, but his lack of athleticism was hidden by playing between super talents like LT Tyron Smith and C Travis Frederick along Dallas's O-line. When he's forced to make improvised reactions to defenders on the move, his limitations show. Watson is considerably less limited physically but was never able to corral his talent as a Raider. His best chance is at guard, not tackle.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

Added: none

Lost: RB Jamaal Charles (released)

As of this writing, Dontari Poe was unsigned. The same was true of several other quality defensive tackles across the league. There's good value to be had here. Poe is an athletic big man on a market that's overstocked with them. A team could probably get him on a cheap one-year deal.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

Added: LT Russell Okung (DEN)

Lost: LB Danny Woodhead (BAL), OL D.J. Fluker (NYG)

Re-signed: SS Jahleel Addae, DE Damion Square

Perhaps no quarterback is better at getting to his checkdown than Philip Rivers. That may seem trivial, but it has led to a ton of passing yards and first downs over the years. The reason Rivers thrives here is the Chargers teach landmark checkdowns. The running back must get to a very specific spot when releasing late into a route. Few backs have a better feel for this than Woodhead. When you consider that he could also run some routes from the slot and even out wide (if it was a spread formation), his departure really hurts the passing game.

OAKLAND RAIDERS

Added: OL Marshall Newhouse (NYG)

Lost: SS Nate Allen (MIA), CB D.J. Hayden (DET), DL Stacy McGee (WAS), ILB Malcolm Smith (SF), OT Menelik Watson (DEN)

All of these departing players were fringe starters at best (which is why they were allowed to leave). The only one who wasn't was the underrated strongman McGee—and he wasn't healthy often enough in 2016.

NFC EAST

DALLAS COWBOYS

Added: CB Nolan Carroll (PHI), DE Damontre Moore (SEA), DT Stephen Paea (CLE)

Lost: S Barry Church (JAX), G Ronald Leary (DEN), DT Terrell McClain (WAS), S J.J. Wilcox (TB), DE Jack Crawford (ATL)

(Up in the air): QB Tony Romo, CB Brandon Carr (unsigned), CB Morris Claiborne (unsigned)

We add the special “up in the air” category here because the fate of these three players will carry big implications. Romo because of the history and, even more so, his cap number (\$24.7 million). Carr and Claiborne because both were part of a secondary that overperformed last season and could potentially have to replace its best players save for Byron Jones and Orlando Scandrick. Stay tuned here, the makeup of Dallas’s defense is still to be determined.

NEW YORK GIANTS

Added: WR Brandon Marshall (NYJ), TE Rhett Ellison (MIN), OL D.J. Fluker (SD/LAC)

Lost: OL Marshall Newhouse (OAK), WR Victor Cruz (released), RB Rashad Jennings (released)

Instead of speculating (read: guessing) about what Marshall will mean for the locker room, let’s focus on something we’re actually privy to seeing: what he can mean on the field. It’s doubtful Marshall’s presence will impact New York’s incumbent superstar, Odell Beckham; it’s still a no-brainer for defenses to double Beckham. Marshall has a chance to be extremely productive. Not only will he see more single coverage downfield, but in New York’s system he’ll get to run a lot of slant patterns—something his body type and skill set is well-suited for.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

Added: WR Alshon Jeffery (CHI), WR Torrey Smith (SF), G Chance Warmack (TEN)

Lost: CB Nolan Carroll (DAL), OLB Connor Barwin (released)

Smith is fast but too stiff to run anything other than straight go routes and the occasional slow-developing comebacker or dig. He’s little more than a No. 4. (Expect him to edge out Nelson Agholor for this role.) Jeffery is a different story. He’s a big body with speed and bendability. In other words, he’s a polished Dorial Green-Beckham. The question is how well can he fit a quick-strike game? The Eagles prefer to get the ball out on three-step dropbacks.

WASHINGTON REDSKINS

Added: DT Terrell McClain (DAL), DT Stacy McGee (OAK), WR Terrelle Pryor (CLE), S D.J. Swearingen (ARI)

Lost: DT Chris Baker (TB), WR Pierre Garçon (SF), WR DeSean Jackson (TB)

Jackson and Garçon, stylistically, were terrific fits for Jay Gruden's system. Jackson could take the top off the D, Garçon was great on in-breaking routes. Gruden designed plays that featured these two in correlation. Pryor is up-and-coming, but in many ways, given the nature of Washington's scheme, he'll only be as effective as the guys lining up around him. Jordan Reed and Jamison Crowder pose unique matchup problems inside. The real key, though, will be little-known second-year man Josh Doctson, who will often line up opposite Pryor.

NFC NORTH

CHICAGO BEARS

Added: CB Prince Amukamara (JAX), S Quintin Demps (HOU), QB Mike Glennon (TB), TE Dion Sims (MIA), WR Markus Wheaton (PIT), WR Kendall Wright (TEN), DE Cornelius Washington (DET)

Lost: QB Matt Barkley (SF), QB Brian Hoyer (SF), QB Jay Cutler (released), WR Alshon Jeffery (PHI), TE Logan Paulsen (SF)

When we last saw Mike Glennon starting, in November 2014, he was a youngster who had at least shown an improved willingness to make throws with defenders in his face. That's always a good sign for a QB's development.

DETROIT LIONS

Added: TE Darren Fells (ARI), CB D.J. Hayden (OAK), DL Akeem Spence (TB), RT Ricky Wagner (DET), LB Paul Worriow (ATL), DE Cornelius Washington (CHI)

Lost: RT Riley Reiff (MIN), RG Larry Warford (NO), LB DeAndre Levy (released)

It's surprising that Reiff got \$26.3 million guaranteed in his five-year, \$58.75 million deal with Minnesota. (Then again, the Vikings last season learned the hard way just how painful offensive tackle problems can be.) Wagner, you could argue, is a stronger, more powerful run-blocker with similar traits as Reiff in pass protection. To get him for \$17.5 million fully guaranteed on a five-year, \$47.5 million deal is a nice transaction.

GREEN BAY PACKERS

Added: TE Martellus Bennett (NE), TE Lance Kendricks (LAR)

Lost: DB Micah Hyde (BUF), OLB/DT Julius Peppers (CAR), C J.C. Tretter (CLE), TE Jared Cook (unsigned)

Re-signed: OLB Nick Perry

We've been beating the drum for Jared Cook to re-sign for one reason: his being a viable receiver anywhere on the field gave this offense flexibility in their formations and personnel packages, which was huge. What we didn't consider: The Packers taking this a step further by signing an even more dynamic version of Cook. That's what Bennett is. Great, great pickup.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS

Added: LT Riley Reiff (DET), RT Mike Remmers (CAR)

Lost: TE Rhett Ellison (NYG), WR Charles Johnson (CAR), LT Matt Kalil (CAR), slot CB Captain Munnerlyn (CAR), RB Adrian Peterson (released)

On the one hand, it's surprising that Peterson remains available, because he's one of the few running backs who can instantly change the makeup of your ground game. On the other hand, it's not a surprise because Peterson is not someone who can change the makeup of your passing game.

NFC SOUTH

ATLANTA FALCONS

Added: None

Lost: FB Patrick DiMarco (BUF), WR Aldrick Robinson (SF), LB Paul Worrilow (DET)

It's odd the Falcons weren't willing to retain DiMarco—he'll cost Buffalo less than \$2.2 million in cap space each of the next three years. DiMarco was great at reading defenses as a zone lead-blocker. There wasn't a better fullback in the NFL last year.

CAROLINA PANTHERS

Added: S Mike Adams (IND), WR Charles Johnson (MIN), LT Matt Kalil (MIN), slot CB Captain Munnerlyn (MIN), DE Julius Peppers (GB), DE Kony Ealy (trade to NE)

Lost: WR Ted Ginn (NO), LB A.J. Klein (NO), RT Mike Remmers (MIN), FB Mike Tolbert (BUF)

You'd think the Panthers would have learned their lesson when it comes to high-profile left tackles who, when you look closely, really don't pass-protect well. But nope, they shelled out \$25 million guaranteed to the younger brother of their longtime center, Ryan Kalil. In Minnesota, before getting hurt last season, Kalil had continued to struggle with his pass-blocking technique. He'll ultimately present the same problems that Michael Oher did, just at a higher price.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

Added: WR Ted Ginn (CAR), LB A.J. Klein (CAR), G Larry Warford (DEN)

Lost: WR Brandin Cooks (trade to NE)

Re-signed: DT Nick Fairley

Kudos for bringing back Fairley. Few defensive tackles over the past two years have played with his kind of motor. He's a light-footed power player who can split double-teams. Locking up the 29-year-old for four years at \$14 million guaranteed was smart.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

Added: DT Chris Baker (WAS), WR DeSean Jackson (WAS), S J.J. Wilcox (DAL)

Lost: QB Mike Glennon (CHI), DT Akeem Spence (DET)

Re-signed: DE William Gholston

This offense became hamstrung at times last season with the way opponents constantly rolled safeties to Mike Evans's side. The addition of Jackson and his speed really complicates that for a defense. Anytime you have wide receivers who can threaten safeties, you limit the defense's ability to take chances and disguise. That makes life markedly easier on a young QB like Jameis Winston.

NFC WEST

ARIZONA CARDINALS

Added: S Antoine Bethea (SF), LB Karlos Dansby (CIN)

Lost: DT Calais Campbell (JAX), TE Darren Fells (DET), S Tony Jefferson (BAL), S D.J. Swearinger (WAS), G Earl Watford (JAX), CB Marcus Cooper (CHI)

The losses of Jefferson and Swearinger hurt a lot. In Arizona's scheme, safeties are relied upon heavily as blitzers and as pass defenders, where they're often responsible for converting from zone to man coverage against seam routes. With Tyrann Mathieu as the only truly proven player remaining at the position, coordinator James Bettcher may have to amend his aggressive scheme in 2017.

LOS ANGELES RAMS

Added: OT Andrew Whitworth (CIN), WR Robert Woods (BUF)

Lost: WR Kenny Britt (CLE), TE Lance Kendricks (GB), C Tim Barnes (released), DE Eugene Sims (released), DE William Hayes (MIA)

Woods is an upgrade over Britt. That may seem crazy—Woods had 613 yards receiving last year, Britt had 1,002—but in McVay's scheme, where route-running precision and versatility are critical, Woods is a more valuable player. That said, the Rams aren't done addressing their receiving corps. They still need at least two more weapons here.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

Added: QB Matt Barkley (CHI), QB Brian Hoyer (CHI), WR Pierre Garçon (WAS), WR Marquise Goodwin (BUF), FB Kyle Juszczyk (BAL), TE Logan Paulsen (CHI), WR Aldrick Robinson (ATL), LB Malcolm Smith (OAK), DT Earl Mitchell (MIA)

Lost: S Antoine Bethea (ARI), WR Torrey Smith (PHI)

A lot of additions but not a lot of movement. Talentwise, this is still the same offense as a year ago, just with different players. At least many of these new players understand Kyle Shanahan's system. That's why they're here; it'll help smooth the transition with the new regime.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

Added: G Luke Joeckel (JAX)

Lost: DE Damontre Moore (DAL)

Minimal activity all-around on the free agent front. Maybe this is why they're a perennial playoff team.

Donald Stephenson agrees to rework deal with Broncos

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
March 13, 2017

The Broncos signed tackle Menelik Watson as a free agent on Friday and the addition of a player who has primarily played right tackle may have led some to wonder about Donald Stephenson's future in Denver.

Watson and guard Ronald Leary have joined the team as they work to upgrade a line that wasn't up to snuff last season. Stephenson started at right tackle in the first year of the three-year deal he signed with the Broncos last season and \$4 million of his 2017 salary was set to become guaranteed against injury on Monday.

Mike Klis of KUSA reports that Stephenson has agreed to rework that payout. He'll get \$2 million on Monday and the other \$2 million will be his if he makes the 53-man roster to start the 2017 season.

The Broncos could give Stephenson or Watson a look at left tackle as they have an opening there after parting ways with Russell Okung. Michael Schofield and Ty Sambrailo are also on the roster and the team could make further moves to add options at both tackle spots as the offseason plays out.

Mason's Mailbag: Thoughts on Menelik Watson

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
March 13, 2017

Would it be financially feasible for the Broncos to pick up Dont'a Hightower as a free agent to help shore up the defense against the run, or would Dontari Poe be a better acquisition, big-money wise, to fill the gap against the run?

-- Thomas Hunt

While both seem certain to fetch hefty contracts -- at least on an average per-year basis -- these two aren't really either/or options, since they play different positions and possess drastically different frames and skill sets.

But for almost any team, Hightower seems to be a better bet in free agency than Poe, at least if you're talking about a multi-year contract. At 346 pounds, Poe has the type of build that usually sees a quick decline in the late 20s -- which may have started already in a disappointing 2016 season. Hightower is in his prime and coming off some of the best games of his career to date; he looks poised to remain at a Pro Bowl/All-Pro level.

@leythdave

@MaseDenver So proud and happy of fellow Mancunian Watson signing for us, what do you think of this pick up? #youknow

It's all about health. It's not a question of whether Menelik Watson is good enough or possesses the physical tools, the intelligence and attitude to succeed at this level; he's strong in all three areas.

But since Watson only began playing American football in 2011, he needs repetitions, which means he needs to avoid the nagging injuries that dogged him in Oakland (and major injuries, like the ruptured Achilles in 2015 that cost him an entire season).

Another factor to consider could be the overall development of offensive linemen. Teams are struggling to find plug-and-play linemen in the draft now more than ever, because it's more difficult to discern pro potential from the college tape when there has never been a greater stylistic gap between college and pro tactics and strategies.

So is it possible that the development time for solid, good-but-not-elite linemen could now be three to four years, rather than one to two? And if that is the case, is the most efficient play under the constraints of the cap to find those linemen who come to the end of their first contract but still possess plenty of growth potential?

If the answers to both of those questions are, "yes," then players like Watson might find themselves in higher demand in future free-agency cycles -- and Watson himself could become a steal. Time -- and his health -- will reveal the success or failure of this addition.

With Christian McCaffrey being either a first- or early-second round selection, should the Broncos look for someone like Ryan Switzer, who is a lot like McCaffrey, in the 3rd round? That way they get their playmaker but can also attack offensive and defensive linemen with their first two picks.

-- David Rodish

If you're looking for a playmaker whose skills are relatively analogous to those of McCaffrey, look at Ohio State's Curtis Samuel. Switzer can contribute on returns and in the passing game, but he doesn't bring the element of being a viable ballcarrier out of the backfield, and can't be used in as many spots -- he likely projects only as a slot receiver. He's also 20 pounds lighter than McCaffrey, so he may not be able to withstand the same pounding. Switzer is an intriguing Round 4 or 5 option, but I think he's a reach in Round 3.

Bottom line -- if McCaffrey is the top player on the Broncos' board when their selection comes up, he ought to be the pick, even with the relative scarcity of quality offensive linemen in this year's class. Even the top linemen come with a passel of questions -- age and lack of high-level college starting experience for Garrett Bolles, the hip injury for Ryan Ramczyk, uncertainty over whether guard or tackle is the best position for Forrest Lamp and Cam Robinson.

A player like Troy's Antonio Garcia -- who is more raw and still building strength, but might have the highest ceiling of any tackle in this draft class -- might be a better O-lineman option in Round 2. Defensive line may be a more viable spot in Round 1, but the Broncos no longer have a pressing, immediate need there.

With both Justin Forsett and Kapri Bibbs becoming free agents, what are the chances of the Broncos taking a guy like Wyoming's Brian Hill the all time Wyoming leading rusher who had a nice combine overall in say like the 5th or 6th round to give Denver a powerful runner?

-- Joseph Saverine

Between free agency, the draft and the undrafted crop, the Broncos will add a running back at some point in the offseason, although from the draft it's impossible to pinpoint one specific back like Hill at this point in time.

Also, note that Bibbs is an exclusive-rights free agent, so basically he's back as soon as he signs the tender the Broncos offered, with no other options available to him. Given the spark he showed when he strung some strong carries together before being injured in Jacksonville, Bibbs is in the picture and will get a long look to show whether he can build off his 2016 spurts.

According to Mike Mayock, he says the Broncos could be looking at a WR with their first pick in the draft. If this holds true, could you see the Broncos possibly picking up John Ross, if still available, with the 20th pick? His draft stock was already a first-rounder and his record breaking 40 time could be that spark the offense and special teams could use.

-- Ethan Stanton

Ross' injury history is a red flag. In his favor is the film, which is first-round caliber. So that separates Ross from other speed demons like Baltimore's Breshad Perriman, who shot into the 2015 first round

with a 40-yard dash of 4.29 seconds at the Combine, but has just 499 yards on 33 receptions in two seasons with one start to his name. But I don't know whether Ross can hold up. Just look at the fact that he had hamstring tightness during his Combine 40.

Further, I take a "caveat emptor" approach with 40-yard dash times. How often are you going 40 yards in a straight line in an actual game? The three-cone drill and short-shuttle are just as important, and that's why I look at McCaffrey, whose three-cone drill of 6.57 seconds was better than all but one wide receiver at the Combine (and was only matched by a single wideout, Western Kentucky's Taywan Taylor). Ross certainly made himself some money, but I just don't see the risk-reward ratio being right for him at No. 20.

In this year's draft, I am starting to like O.J. Howard the more I see him. If he is still on the board at the Broncos 20th pick I would like to see them draft him because of his size and athleticism. Who in the NFL is a good comparison for a player like Howard based off his size, hands, and athleticism?

-- Ethan Stanton

Jimmy Graham and Eric Ebron are probably the two best comparisons. Jordan Reed isn't as long or as big as Howard, and Howard doesn't compare in frame size to, say, Rob Gronkowski or Martellus Bennett.

The issue as to whether to pick Howard at No. 20 isn't whether he's good enough. He is, and I don't think it would be unreasonable to take him around the 10th pick. It's whether you pick a tight end there when the quality and depth is so copious that you might be able to get a player like Bucky Hodges -- who has a similar size/speed blend, but needs more blocking work -- in Round 2 or Gerald Everett, Adam Shaheen or Evan Engram in Round 3.

Sacco Sez: The story of the Broncos' first free-agent signing

By Jim Saccomano
DenverBroncos.com
March 13, 2017

Today's title refers all the way back to the very first unrestricted free agent ever signed by the Broncos, back when NFL free agency began in 1993.

Follow me a bit as I connect the dots.

Newly signed tackle Ronald Leary is an offensive lineman who wore number 65 during his fine career with the Dallas Cowboys.

The most legendary number 65 in Denver history is Gary Zimmerman, the Pro Football Hall of Fame left tackle who anchored our offensive line for our first world championship victory in Super Bowl XXXII.

But one of the reasons we made the trade for Zimmerman — certainly one of the greatest trades in team history — was that the Broncos' very first unrestricted free agent signing got injured.

And that would be Don Maggs.

Don Maggs was 6-5, 290-pound left tackle who played both tackle and guard at Tulane University in New Orleans.

He was drafted in the second round of the NFL supplemental draft in 1984 but chose to start his career in the United States Football League (USFL), playing for the Pittsburgh Maulers in 1984. A year later, he played for the USFL New Jersey Generals, which were owned by future President Donald Trump.

Maggs left the Generals for the Houston Oilers in 1986, and he had six excellent years in Houston, blocking for future Hall of Fame quarterback Warren Moon in the Oilers' famous "run-and-shoot" offense.

He established himself as a superb left tackle, which was one of the primary needs the Broncos were trying to fill when unrestricted free agency began in 1993.

The first player signed by the Broncos in this period was Maggs, with considerable hype and promise for future championships.

But unfortunately, Maggs was injured during that offseason and in his two years in Denver (1993 and 1994), he played in just 16 games and only started three.

By the end of the 1993 training camp it was apparent that his injury would severely hamper the protection of John Elway at the vital left tackle position, and when Denver had the opportunity to make a trade with Minnesota for Gary Zimmerman, who was at a contractual stalemate with the Vikings and had not reported to their camp, the Broncos jumped at the chance.

Denver traded its first and sixth round draft choices in 1994 and a second in 1995 for Zimmerman, but the lost draft choices proved well worth it as Zimmerman helped lead Denver to their first Super Bowl victory on his way to the Hall of Fame.

You can never really play the 'what-if' game, but it seems probable that the Broncos would have had substantially less interest in Zimmerman if Maggs had been able to play to the level that he had established while protecting Warren Moon in Houston.

Unfortunately, the injury to Maggs ended his career after the two years in Denver, but he is forever in Bronco history as the team's first unrestricted free agent signing ever, as well as being one of only a handful of Broncos to be able to say they once played for a team owned by a future president.