

# Jhabvala vs. Kiz: Can Shane Ray fill the void left by DeMarcus Ware with Broncos?

By Nicki Jhabvala and Mark Kiszla

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Can linebacker Shane Ray fill the void left by retirement of DeMarcus Ware?

Kiz: Within a span of barely more than a year, the Broncos have seen outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware follow quarterback Peyton Manning out the door to retirement. Don't know about you, but I say Ware and Manning were by far the two strongest voices of leadership on the team that won Super Bowl 50. It's time for Shane Ray to shine. Is he ready?

Jhabvala: On the field, Ray can absolutely fill the void. He pretty much did last year as Ware nursed multiple injuries and missed six games. The plan heading into the 2016 season was for Ware to be used primarily on situational downs, giving Ray the bulk of the playing time. And after packing on some muscle in the offseason, Ray stepped up to play 665 defensive snaps (58.1 percent). He had 48 tackles, eight sacks, 21 quarterback hits, a forced fumble and two fumble recoveries. But in terms of leadership, the void needs to be filled by Von Miller, a veteran who matured with the help of Ware. The torch has been passed.

Kiz: Let me start by giving general manager John Elway major props for taking Ray with the 23rd pick in the 2015 draft, when a citation for possession of marijuana caused him to slip down the board to the Broncos. The team was correct to place its trust in Ray. That causes me to wonder: After being booted from the NFL combine, there's no way Alabama linebacker Reuben Foster falls all the way to 20th in the first round, right? If that somehow happens, grabbing Foster would be a no-brainer.

Jhabvala: I'm not convinced Foster will be available at No. 20. The incident at the NFL combine, in which he was sent home after an altercation with a student hospital worker, has some saying his draft stock will take a hit. But let's be real: Right or wrong, many things are forgiven in pro sports if a player is an elite talent and can help a team win. Foster is one of those players. But for the Broncos, I don't think he's a no-brainer. As deep as this draft class is on the defensive side, the Broncos still need help on the offensive end. If they don't find a left tackle in free agency then Ryan Ramczyk, Garrett Bolles or Cam Robinson can be and should be coveted in the draft.

Kiz: In three seasons with the Broncos, Ware averaged slightly more than seven sacks per year, in no small part because injuries limited his playing time. There's no way Ray can match Ware as a leader in the locker room. But as a force on the field? I think a dozen sacks in 2017 is within Ray's reach. Is that lofty goal being unrealistic, or putting unfair pressure on Ray, who has started eight games in two pro seasons?

Jhabvala: Twelve sacks is reasonable. Ray doubled his sack total from his rookie season (four) and it didn't appear as though he came close to his ceiling in his second season. Ray was drafted to be Ware's successor and two years playing alongside the likes of Ware and Miller is a gift most pass rushers never receive. I think Ray took advantage of it, heeding the advice of both with his training and on-field

technique. Last season, according to Pro Football Focus, Ray nearly doubled the 25 QB pressures he had in 2015 with 45 to rank No. 10 in productivity among 3-4 outside linebackers.

# Broncos need to fill hole at LT, Vance Joseph says better coaching will help Donald Stephenson, OL

By Cameron Wolfe

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Broncos general manager John Elway and coach Vance Joseph appear satisfied having added four free agents weighing a combined 1,294 pounds of power, aggression and attitude to boost the offensive and defensive lines.

Nevertheless, a gaping hole at left tackle remains.

Elway and Joseph speak of the offensive line as a “work in progress” with additions via trade, the draft or late free agent signings as options, although the pickings are slim in the latter category.

“It’s still open. We’re not done,” Elway said. “Last time I heard, we don’t go to camp until July. We don’t have that fixed just yet. But we’ll figure out how to get that done.”

In the meantime, the contenders to play left tackle are Menelik Watson, signed as a free agent from Oakland; Ty Sambrailo, a former high draft pick who has yet to solidify a role and the current leader in the clubhouse, Donald Stephenson, who was the starting right tackle for much of the 2016 season. He has the most experience of the three at left tackle, having played there when with Kansas City. There’s a belief among the coaches he can improve upon a poor 2016 season with the help of a new coaching staff and a new blocking scheme designed by offensive line coach Jeff Davidson.

“He helps because he is an athletic guy who has played some left tackle in the past. Maybe in a new system and maybe a new coach, he can go out at left and play for us. No one knows yet,” Joseph said. “He’s a guy that when you watch his tape, he does flash great ability. That is at left tackle. That is the basketball footwork type of guy. He’s got those skills to play left tackle.”

Stephenson playing left tackle might not inspire much confidence among the fans, but there’s also the possibility that the starting left tackle isn’t on the roster yet.

Denver appears to have solidified four of the five offensive line spots so far. If everything goes right, the Broncos added starters in bulldozer guard Ronald Leary and Watson at right tackle.

“You watch Leary play, he played the game with an attitude. He was physical. He was trying to finish blocks. It’s the same with Watson,” Joseph said. “That is something that helps the entire culture of your offensive line. Running the ball on our terms, heavy box or light box, let’s run the football.”

It’s possible the Broncos could go into offseason workouts with Stephenson at left tackle, Leary and Max Garcia at guard, Matt Paradis at center and Watson at right tackle. But they’re still looking.

The free agency market is barren with injury-riddled former Bronco Ryan Clady and Sebastian Vollmer available, but neither has been able to stay healthy in recent years.

Joseph said it's possible veterans are released between now and training camp this summer. A trade is also an option with Philadelphia's Jason Peters perhaps worth checking out.

The most likely option to fill the left tackle spot is the draft, however. Joseph said he sees three sure-fire first round picks at offensive tackle. Those are expected to be Wisconsin's Ryan Ramczyk, Utah's Garrett Bolles and possibly Alabama's Cam Robinson.

Joseph raved about Ramczyk and Bolles at the combine, while noting he prefers a true left tackle. The draft option, however, wouldn't be without risk as rookie left tackles rarely make a positive immediate impact.

# Contract details on Broncos DL signings Domata Peko and Zach Kerr

By Cameron Wolfe  
Denver Post  
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Broncos went value shopping and bought themselves two potential starters to shore up their leaky run defense. Domata Peko is expected to man the nose tackle position replacing recently departed Sylvester Williams. Zach Kerr will likely compete for a starting role at defensive end (three-technique) opposite Derek Wolfe.

Here are the contract figures, provided by NFL sources, for Peko and Kerr:

## Domata Peko

Details: Two years, \$7.5 million with \$3.8 million (\$1 million in signing bonus) guaranteed.

2017 cap hit: \$2.8 million base salary (guaranteed) + \$500,000 prorated signing bonus = \$3.3 million cap hit

2018 cap hit: \$3.7 million base salary + \$500,000 prorated signing bonus = \$4.2 million cap hit

## Zach Kerr

Details: Two years, \$3.25 million, includes \$250,000 in 46-man game day roster bonuses, with \$1.5 million (500,000 in signing bonus) guaranteed.

2017 cap hit: \$1 million base salary (guaranteed) + \$250,000 prorated signing bonus + 250,000 in 46-man game day bonuses = \$1.5 million cap hit.

2018 cap hit: \$1.25 million base + 250,000 prorated signing bonus + 250,000 in 46-man game day bonuses = \$1.75 million cap hit.

Broncos projected cap space (prior to outside linebacker Kasim Edehali's one-year contract): \$20.74 million

# Domata Peko: The new Samson of the Broncos interior defense

By Mike Klis

9News

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It would be hard to believe Richie Incognito allowed Domata Peko's hair to pass without a yank.

Cleveland Browns center Cameron Erving might have found those long frayed locks were there to be pulled.

Seattle had a couple roughneck guards a couple years ago in J.R. Sweezy and Justin Britt who might have found a quick tug on Peko's hair to be irresistible.

"Probably happens all the time but in the heat of the battle you don't really feel it," Peko said during in an interview with 9News this week in the lobby of Denver Broncos' headquarters. "Sometimes, it gets pulled here and there but nothing major."

Peko is the Samson of the NFL. After he spent 11 seasons in Cincinnati, Bengal fans may have looked at him only as a dynamic nose tackle. He's not there, yet, with those who follow the Denver Broncos.

It's the Broncos who now have that big guy with all that hair.

"I wear my hair long because I'm Samoan," said Peko, who was born in Los Angeles, but grew up in Pago Pago, American Samoa. "A lot of our countrymen wear it like that. (Former Pittsburgh safety Troy) Polamalu, guys like that. But also back home a lot of the men wear long hair from back in the day when they were warriors, that warrior mentality, so that's why I wear it."

More importantly, the Broncos believe Peko is a run-stuffing upgrade to Sylvester Williams at the point of attack. Williams was good enough to start 3 1/2 years in the middle of the Denver defense and then receive a three-year contract from the Tennessee Titans.

But the Broncos' finished 28th in stopping the run last season. Peko, 32, can rush the passer, too, as he had a career-best 5.0 sacks as recently as 2015. He had none last year, though.

"It was a different year. I had more tackles than I had the year before but not as many sacks," he said, and, indeed, he had 37 tackles in 2016, two more than in '15. "We had a new D-line coach and we worked on different techniques, but I hate to say that. I just need to get better. Need to improve."

Selected in the fourth round out of Michigan State in 2006, Peko played in 60 consecutive games, counting one postseason game, to start his career, missed the final six of 2009 with an ankle injury, then played in another 117 in a row, counting the playoffs, entering free agency.

He signed a two-year, \$7.5 million contract with the Broncos with his playing streak intact.

“He’s a big man that understands his job description,” said Broncos head coach Vance Joseph, who was the Bengals’ secondary coach in 2014-15. “He understands that it’s his job to hold the point between the center and the guard to keep our linebackers free. He understands that and he wants that job. He’s been good at it for a long time. He doesn’t miss practice and he doesn’t miss games. That is a talent.”

Joseph is one reason why Peko decided to play for the Broncos instead of Minnesota, Philadelphia, San Francisco, who were also after him, or stick with Cincinnati. Winning a playoff game is another. The Bengals went 0-7 in the playoffs during Peko’s career. The Broncos in that span won six postseason games, including two AFC Championships and one Super Bowl.

“The organization here is always a contender,” Peko said. “I want to win. I’m here for a reason, to come in here and help out the defense in the trenches there in the middle. I felt like this was the best opportunity for me to pursue a ring and to have fun while I’m doing it.”

# Broncos working toward answer to biggest offseason question

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
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Maybe it isn't quite the football-is-family missive the league wants, but one of the Denver Broncos' newest arrivals -- tackle Menelik Watson -- offered his own take on team chemistry in recent days.

"If they're getting into something, I'm getting into something," Watson said with a grin.

He added some things about having his teammates' backs, about sticking up for each other and how he's been a fighter his whole life. Certainly, some of it can be attributed to the prospect of a fresh start and the fact he wanted to make new friends in new places.

Watson is a physically gifted player who has dealt with a string of injuries that seem to strike him when he's just about to show what he can really do. So, he sees the Broncos as a massive opportunity to have an impact on a team that routinely considers itself in the Super Bowl conversation.

But his signing, as well as that of guard Ronald Leary, are about chemistry as much as football. Broncos chief decision-maker John Elway has repeatedly said the difference between talented teams that do, or don't, turn that talent into success is "how that locker room is."

And he made it clear he was signing Watson and Leary because he wants them to give the offensive line that physical edge Elway feels last year's group didn't have as the Broncos struggled to protect the passer and carve out room in the running game. But this week he also dropped another missive about what's needed up front.

"With Ron (Leary), we like the way that he plays the game. He's a physical guy that plays with an attitude," Elway said. "... Menelik has the same kind of ability at tackle. The good thing is they have personalities, as you've seen. They're real positive guys that like playing the game. Not only are they good football players, but I think they're going to add a real positive feel in the locker room with the type of people they are. I think we get a little bit of the personalities back and they're going to help there."

In short, the offense needs to have a little of that don't-start-none-there-won't-be-none swagger the Broncos' defense has carried around over the past two seasons. And that's what the offseason is for, to fix, to repair, to change.

However, the Broncos' work up front on offense still lacks a rather significant piece of the puzzle -- left tackle. They dove into free agency and didn't get one yet, at least not a slam-dunk solution.

"It's still open, we're not done," Elway said. "... We feel like we've got some different options. We're not done yet. Last time I heard, we don't go to camp until July. We don't have that fixed just yet. But we'll figure out how to get that done."

He's floated the idea of Watson or Donald Stephenson (who started at right tackle and was briefly benched at right tackle last season) as possible solutions -- or at least two players who could get a look. But neither has shown himself to be a consistent blind-side protector to this point, though Stephenson has almost two dozen starts at left tackle.

Broncos coach Vance Joseph even said this week that the Broncos' future left tackle might be a veteran player who is on somebody's roster and hasn't been released yet. Overall, the draft is also thin in potential rookie starters at left tackle -- the list might not take five fingers to count.

In short, consider the search still on. Overall, the Broncos hope a new coaching staff, a few reinforcements and little luck when it comes to Watson's past injury history -- he's never played more than 12 games in a season -- will bring the change they need in the line and that they can, as Elway puts it "play the best five."

There were many reasons the Broncos had their first playoff miss since 2010 last season, but the single biggest reason, without argument, was that the offensive line didn't play well enough. And this is now the third consecutive offseason when it's been a priority.

That's one long chemistry experiment still in search of a eureka moment.

# Broncos say it again: They like the quarterbacks they have

By Jeff Legwold  
ESPN.com  
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This just in: Just like they were a week ago, the Denver Broncos are still happy with their two quarterbacks.

Yes, John Elway keeps saying it. Yes, Vance Joseph keeps saying it.

And given that the two are, respectively, the Broncos' chief football decision-maker and the team's coach, those opinions should matter. This all comes to light because it seems so many people in so many parts of the football world keep saying the Broncos are interested in Tony Romo and the Broncos keep saying they're really interested in Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch.

"I think we feel good about where we are," is how Elway succinctly put it this week.

With free agency having been open for almost a week, Romo is still with the Dallas Cowboys. Owner Jerry Jones seemingly hopes to trade Romo -- and an immense contract -- instead of simply cutting the quarterback loose with nothing in return except some memories and the dead money against the salary cap.

And with that, the Broncos have appeared over and over again in most of the stories about trading for Romo or signing Romo. The Broncos have looked at plenty of them with raised eyebrows because an awful lot of what's been written or said was news to them.

Siemian, for example, was in the Broncos complex in recent days getting treatment on his surgically repaired shoulder when the team was (falsely, Elway says) said to be shopping him to the New York Jets in a trade.

"I will just tell you this: There have been a lot of things out there that aren't true as far as what is going on with our quarterbacks," Elway said. "That is what happens. Everything gets frothed up there. We just continue to go down our plan. That is to continue to stay open. When things come available, we look at them at that point in time."

The Broncos' plan is now is the same as it was when the offseason opened. They like Siemian a lot, and the belief is that if the Broncos can protect the kid better, he can win plenty of games.

The Broncos were two dropped passes away from an 11-5 finish led by a battered Siemian playing without the benefit of any sort of run game.

And they like Lynch's potential -- a lot. But Lynch still has some ground to cover. That isn't a surprise to the Broncos, since they did plenty of work on him before they made him a first-round pick. Elway has said the last thing he wants to do is rush Lynch, no matter how many times the false premise is floated in drive time that Lynch has to play now.

The guy is under contract through 2020. And there's simply no compelling reason to put him in the lineup faster than, say, the way the Packers handled a young Aaron Rodgers.

"We're comfortable with our two young guys," Joseph said this week. "We really are."

Joseph also called any pursuit of Romo "a non-issue" and added: "We've got two good, young quarterbacks that we're happy about. We're going to put our focus there."

But it keeps going because that's the world we all live in. Teams say one thing all the time and do another.

Coaches say they intend to be in their current jobs a long time and then take a new job the next day. Owners have given votes of confidence to the same guy they've fired the next day.

And Elway won't definitively slam the door on Romo or any other potential move. If Romo were a free agent -- the Broncos aren't considering a trade for him and they say privately they've laughed at the idea they would -- and he would surrender most, or all, of the money in any potential contract if he got injured, or would play for mostly a pile of incentives, the Broncos would consider it.

Like they would consider any free agent.

"Nothing has changed since the combine," Elway said this week. "We're excited about the two guys that we have here. We feel like we're in good shape there."

Maybe the story doesn't end until it's either Siemian or Lynch under center for the season opener or Romo is playing elsewhere or working as a television analyst, but give the Broncos credit. They haven't hidden their intentions. They keep saying what they're going to do, even if plenty of folks don't believe them.

# Joe Mixon set for 12 total visits with NFL teams so far

By Tom Pelissero

USA Today

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The Cincinnati Bengals were the first team to bring in controversial Oklahoma running back Joe Mixon for a private visit before the NFL draft. They won't be the last.

Eleven other NFL teams have scheduled visits for Mixon so far, his agent, Peter Schaffer, told USA TODAY Sports on Monday. And it wouldn't be a surprise if Mixon ends up taking more visits than that, since his exclusion from the NFL scouting combine means teams must find other venues to do their homework on him.

The Cincinnati Enquirer, part of the USA TODAY Network, reported Saturday that Mixon was in town to meet with the Bengals, who also were among the teams to meet privately with him before or after his pro day workout last week. Schaffer declined to identify the other teams that will host Mixon, but said a couple of the visits are set for this week.

Mixon, 20, is regarded by some scouts as a top-15 or top-20 talent. The gruesome video of him breaking a woman's jaw and cheekbone with a punch 2½ years ago has already taken him off some draft boards and left him in limbo on others. But plenty of people want to know more before making decisions, and there's a growing feeling within the league Mixon won't fall further than the third round.

He impressed on the field Wednesday at pro day, where he ran the 40-yard dash in the 4.4-second range. Fifty-six people representing all 32 teams attended, according to the school. Schaffer said Mixon spoke with teams throughout the day before and day of the workout.

Teams are limited to 30 pre-draft visits to their facility, contributing to frustration voiced privately by many in the league – and publicly by Detroit Lions general manager Bob Quinn – about the NFL policy that barred Mixon and others with past issues from going to the combine.

# NFL free agency: Belichick's brilliance, the Browns' creativity among 10 key takeaways

By Tom Pelissero

CBSSports.com

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NFL teams collectively having slightly more than \$1.1 billion of salary cap space at their disposal was responsible for a spending spree when free agency started March 9. With the first wave over, teams will begin to exercise more fiscal restraint and start signing players at a much better value. Linebacker Dont'a Hightower, among the consensus best players available at the start of free agency, remains unsigned.

The NFL's annual owners meeting, which is March 26-29 in Phoenix, Arizona, typically signifies the end of free agency for all practical purposes. Teams will devote most of their attention to the upcoming NFL Draft held April 27-29 after the meeting wraps up.

Here are 10 contract-related thoughts and observations since the start of free agency.

## 1. Cleveland's creativity

The Browns made the most unexpected move of the offseason in bringing an NBA approach to the NFL by taking free-agent bust quarterback Brock Osweiler's \$16 million fully guaranteed 2017 base salary off the Texans' hands without any intention of keeping him. The Texans had to give the Browns, who place a premium on draft capital, their 2018 second-round pick and a 2017 sixth-round pick. The Texans acquired a 2017 fourth-round from the Browns in the process.

The Browns have 11 selections in each of the next two drafts, including three second round picks in 2018.

Although the Patriots have declared backup quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo off limits, the Browns have the ammunition to make New England an offer it can't refuse. The Browns are having a difficult time getting something in return for Osweiler from another team despite a willingness to eat a significant portion of his salary as a part of a deal. The expectation is Cleveland will release Osweiler if he can't be dealt. The Browns could do this because they began free agency with slightly over \$100 million of cap space, which is almost unheard of.

Cleveland's move is unlikely to start an NFL trend because most teams aren't in a salary-cap position to absorb an exorbitant salary for a player that has little to no value to them.

## 2. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again

The Jaguars have been one of the NFL's most aggressive teams in free agency over the past three years, doling out almost \$500 million in contracts with very little to show for it. Their 11 wins are the fewest in the NFL during this span.

Jacksonville's free-agency futility hasn't been a deterrent to more spending.

Cornerback A.J. Bouye left the AFC South rival Texans for \$65 million over five years with \$26 million fully guaranteed at signing. Defensive lineman Calais Campbell came in after spending his entire nine-year career with the Cardinals. His four-year, \$60 million deal has \$30 million fully guaranteed at signing. Safety Barry Church landed a four-year, \$26 million contract.

If Jacksonville's latest free-agency signings don't help the Jaguars finally move out of the top five of the NFL Draft for the first time since 2011, it should be time to take a different approach to building the roster.

### 3. Bill Belichick's brilliance

At times, it seems as if Patriots head coach Bill Belichick is playing chess while other teams are playing checkers. The Patriots won Super Bowl LI despite dealing their best pass rusher, Chandler Jones, to the Cardinals last offseason and their most versatile defender, Jamie Collins, to the Browns right before the trading deadline.

New England isn't standing pat in its quest to repeat as Super Bowl champion. The Patriots acquired wide receiver Brandin Cooks and a 2017 fourth-round pick from the Saints for New England's 2017 first-round pick (32nd overall) and a 2017 third-round pick to give the Patriots their best deep threat since Randy Moss a decade ago.

The loss of tight end Martellus Bennett to free agency was somewhat offset by the acquisition of Dwayne Allen and a 2017 sixth-round pick from the Colts for a 2017 fourth-round pick. Getting defensive end Kony Ealy, who had a disappointing 2016 season after a three-sack performance in Super Bowl 50, from the Panthers only cost the Patriots eight spots in the NFL Draft -- from the bottom of the second round to the early part of the third round. Ealy is an extremely cost-effective replacement for Jabaal Sheard, who received a three-year, \$25.5 million contract from the Colts. Ealy is making approximately \$900,000 in 2017, the final year of his rookie contract.

Belichick made a rare high-priced free-agent signing by landing cornerback Stephon Gilmore from the Bills, a division rival, with a five-year, \$65 million contract containing \$40 million in guarantees. Patience with inside linebacker Dont'a Hightower could result in him returning to the Patriots for less than the \$12.5 million per year and \$26.4 million guaranteed Collins got from Cleveland because of a softer than anticipated market.

### 4. Soft running back market

Running backs were hot commodities early in free agency last year. Doug Martin re-signed with the Buccaneers for \$35.75 million (worth up to \$42,937,500 with salary escalators and incentives) over five years with \$15 million fully guaranteed. Chris Ivory and Lamar Miller signed long-term deals with the Jaguars and Texans averaging in excess of \$6.25 million per year.

The exact opposite has occurred this year.

The top available ball carriers (LeGarrette Blount, Jamaal Charles, Eddie Lacy, Latavius Murray and Adrian Peterson) are still on the open market. Peterson in particular appears to be in for a rude awakening financially because of the recent history for high-mileage, older running backs. After setting the running back market for the past several years on a deal with the Vikings averaging more than \$14 million per year, the soon-to-be 32-year-old's compensation might be comparable to the \$4 million per year Frank Gore and Steven Jackson received as free agents in recent years.

Fullback Kyle Juszczyk is making out like a bandit. He reportedly received an eye popping four-year, \$21 million deal from the 49ers, averaging more than twice as much as the NFL's next highest-paid fullback. It was inconceivable that Juszczyk could land a deal averaging more than Peterson a week ago but that is now a distinct possibility.

#### 5. Who needs an agent?

Russell Okung's second foray into self-representation went much better than his first one.

Last year, Okung didn't sign with the Broncos until the second week of free agency after all of the most lucrative contracts had been given out. Okung took a one-year deal for \$5 million with another \$3 million in incentives, which were earned, giving the Broncos an option for an additional four years worth \$48 million. Denver refused to pick up the option for the 2017-20 seasons.

Surprisingly, Okung was able to replace the option and then some. The Chargers gave Okung a four-year, \$53 million contract containing \$25 million fully guaranteed at signing. The deal makes Okung the NFL's highest-paid offensive lineman with a \$13.25 million average yearly salary.

#### 6. It starts in the trenches

Offensive linemen have been the biggest beneficiaries of the free-agency spending spree. This might be partially because college spread offenses aren't conducive to producing NFL-ready lineman.

Kevin Zeitler established a new salary benchmark for guards. The five-year, \$60 million contract he received from the Browns has \$31.5 million of guarantees. Ricky Wagner became the first pure right tackle to eclipse the \$7 million-per-year mark. His five-year, \$47.5 million contract with the Lions has \$29.5 million of guarantees. Age didn't prevent the Rams from giving Andrew Whitworth a three-year, \$33.75 million deal (worth up to \$36 million with incentives).

The free-agent riches aren't reserved just for top-flight lineman. In addition to the Chargers making Okung the NFL's highest-paid offensive lineman by average yearly salary, Matt Kalil landed a five-year, \$55.5 million deal from the Panthers after missing most of the 2016 season because of a hip problem. The Lions moved Riley Reiff out of the left tackle spot he occupied since being drafted in 2012 for 2016 first-round pick Taylor Decker. After a season at right tackle, the Vikings gave Reiff a five-year, \$58.75 million contract with \$26.3 million fully guaranteed to return to the left side. Ronald Leary took advantage of La'el Collins being sidelined most of last season with a foot injury. He received a four-year, \$36 million deal from the Broncos with \$24 million in guarantees.

## 7. Familiarity often brings comfort

A strong tie or positive experience between a player and coach or team executive has led to several reunions this offseason. Most notably, the Browns weakened the in-state rival Bengals by having head coach Hue Jackson reunite with right guard Kevin Zeitler. Jackson was Zeitler's offensive coordinator in 2014 and '15.

The Lions upgraded at right tackle with Ricky Wagner. Head coach Jim Caldwell was the former Raven's offensive coordinator during his 2013 rookie season. Right guard Larry Warford, who had quarterbacks coach Joe Lombardi as his offensive coordinator with the Lions in 2014 and part of '15, brings youthful experience to the Saints' offensive line. Titans general manager Jon Robinson tapped his Patriots roots to sign cornerback Logan Ryan.

The Eagles' director of pro scouting, Dwayne Joseph, was a front office executive with the Bears during 2012 second-round pick Alshon Jeffery's four-year rookie contract. Newly hired wide receivers coach Mike Groh served in that same capacity with the Bears during Jeffery's second through fourth NFL seasons.

San Francisco coach Kyle Shanahan went with a quarterback, Brian Hoyer, that knows his system. Hoyer ran Shanahan's system during his lone season as Browns offensive coordinator in 2014. Wide receiver Pierre Garcon's experience with Shanahan's offense should pay dividends. He had 113 receptions and 1,346 receiving yards, both career bests, for the Redskins in 2013 with Shanahan as his offensive coordinator.

## 8. Kam Chancellor crankiness?

Kam Chancellor engaged in an ill-advised holdout in 2015 lasting through the second game of the season because he was unhappy with the four-year, \$28 million extension he signed in 2013, which made him one of the NFL's highest-paid strong safeties.

A lot has changed since then.

The Seahawks rewarded teammate Michael Bennett, who expressed dissatisfaction with his own contract around the same time as Chancellor but didn't hold out, with a three-year, \$29.5 million extension as the 2016 regular season was coming to a close. Reshad Jones' new four-year, \$48 million extension containing \$33 million in guarantees with the Dolphins could be problematic. He signed a similar deal to Chancellor's in 2013 and was taken just taken care of before his contract year despite missing the final 10 games of the 2016 season with a shoulder injury requiring surgery.

Chancellor, who is scheduled to make \$7.125 million in his contract year, is recuperating from minor postseason surgery on both ankles. He would likely take exception to the Seahawks using his injuries as justification for not renegotiating his contract given Miami's treatment of Jones. Addressing Chancellor's contract like Jones' might create an issue with Earl Thomas, who became the NFL's highest-paid safety at \$10 million per year with his 2014 extension. Thomas is under contract through the 2018 season.

## 9. Tight end temerity

It's hard to make sense of the developments at tight end.

Martellus Bennett was clearly the best available at the position but didn't land the richest free-agent contract. Bennett's three-year, \$21 million deal is a tremendous value for the Packers. Only \$6.3 million is guaranteed. He brings a dimension to Green Bay's offense that has been missing since a neck injury forced Jermichael Finley to retire in 2014.

Jermaine Gresham, who caught 37 passes for 391 yards in 2016, returned to the Cardinals on a four-year, \$28 million deal with \$16.5 million in guarantees. Dion Sims fundamentally changed the market for tight ends known more for blocking than pass catching. He got \$18 million over three years from the Bears with \$10 million in guarantees. Before Sims' deal, \$3 million per year was considered a steep price for a blocking tight end. Thirty-three-year-old Vernon Davis took a three-year, \$15 million deal with \$7.5 million fully guaranteed to remain with the Redskins as a second tight end.

## 10. The closing of a playoff window

The Bengals' five-year streak of playoff appearances came to an end in 2016. The loss of wide receivers Marvin Jones and Mohamed Sanu to the Lions and Falcons in free agency last year contributed to Cincinnati's 6-9-1 record in 2016.

Right guard Kevin Zeitler and left tackle Andrew Whitworth were the only bright spots for an offensive line that gave up 41 sacks last season. Losing Zeitler and Whitworth to the Browns and Rams will likely be a bigger obstacle to overcome for the Bengals than the departures at wide receiver last offseason.

# DeMarcus Ware: 'I Can't Let Passion Overtake My Sense'

By Peter King

MMQB

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DeMarcus Ware could have kept playing. He was working out, and he was over neck and back ailments that wrecked his 2016 season in Denver. Ware is 34, and he had a \$9 million offer on the table for 2017 (he won't say from which team, but Dallas is a best guess), and he felt he could have the kind of reborn season that would satisfy the football devotee inside of him.

"You go through so much as a player to keep playing—for me lately, the neck injury, the back injury—and then you correct those things," Ware told The MMQB Tuesday afternoon, a day after he finalized his emotional decision to retire from football.

"And right now as a I stand here, my body feels great. My body feels youthful. There is no question in my mind that I could have played two or three more years. But I'm realistic about it. My body's good now, but how long will that last? How long can your body hold up at 34, 35, when what you do is likely to hurt yourself?"

In other words, I said, you feel good now, but the way football is, there's a good chance that something, on some part of the body, would flare up this season, and there's no way you'd feel this good through an entire season.

"Now you see where I'm coming from," Ware said. "How many times when I go through a full season do I feel great from start to finish? It's hard. Football has been great for me. I love football. Always will. Heck yeah, I want to get out there and play. But I can't let passion overrule my sense. I am walking away with respect. I gave the fans, I gave my family, I gave my teammates, everything I had every game. One hundred percent. One ... hundred ... percent."

But this was a surprise Monday, when Ware broke the news, because he'd talked openly this off-season about playing in 2017 and beyond. Could he change his mind? It's possible, but he sounded like a man secure with his decision Tuesday. "It's important for my family, and for my future," he said. "But the decision was emotional. Very emotional. The 'R' word comes out of your mouth ... and you get emotional. When you're playing, you think the NFL's forever. You think it's never going to end."

In nine seasons with Dallas, then three with Denver, Ware was one of the very small handful of premier edge rushers of the new century. He is eighth on the all-time sack list with 138.5, one behind 2017 Hall of Fame enshrinee Jason Taylor and three behind 2014 Hall of Fame enshrinee Michael Strahan. Taylor and Strahan played 15 seasons. Ware played 12.

Ware, too, leaves a legacy of treating people the right way. His former teammates in Dallas, and then in Denver, looked up to him about football and about life. "The Peyton Manning of our defense," Emmanuel Sanders called Ware in a text to ESPN, and he didn't mean just about football.

Ware had a terrific second act in Denver. Peyton Manning led the offense. Ware led the defense. In fact, on the night before Denver's Super Bowl 50 victory over Carolina 13 months ago, it was Manning and Ware picked to speak emotionally to the Denver players. Both veterans' voices cracked as they spoke that night. And the next day, Ware had the last big game of his career, sacking Cam Newton twice in Denver's 24-10 victory.

But that's not the game Ware recalled when I asked for his greatest game.

He harkened back to 2009. It was December. Dallas, losers of two straight, was 8-5 and traveling to New Orleans on a Saturday night on national TV—and the Saints were 13-0. "We played San Diego the previous week, and honestly, I thought I broke my neck." Ware's head collided violently with a Charger offensive lineman's hip, and he lay on the ground, and he had to be carted off the field on a back board. "They took my face mask off, and the helmet, and they were so careful. And after the game, my guys were there, telling me my health is important and You don't have to play.

"So we go to New Orleans, I was in the locker room, and I could just feel it. In football, you've got to understand—you don't play for yourself. You play for your teammates. That's how I've always been. And no one said anything to me, but I could feel it. D-Ware, we need you to play. I hadn't had pads on the whole week. We needed this game to have a chance to make the playoffs. Before the game, I go up to [fullback Deon Anderson] with my helmet on. We bump heads, just to test it, and I feel fine. That give me confidence."

Two sacks, two forced fumbles, two Saints turnovers. Dallas 24, New Orleans 17. The Cowboys went on to win the NFC East.

"That day was big for me," Ware said. "I was captain of the defense, but I gained even more respect from my teammates. Like, This guy's the warrior we knew he was. And respect is everything to me. I put my team first."

And today? "Now, I put myself first. I put my family first. And look out world. Here I come."

# DeMarcus Ware: The Definition of a Leader and a Teammate

By Robert Klemko

MMQB

March 15, 2017

Shane Ray had the good fortune of being the first-round draft pick of the Denver Broncos in 2015, the year they won the Super Bowl with DeMarcus Ware and Von Miller as bookend pass-rushers. In two short years with Ware, Ray got a graduate degree in football and life in the NFL from Ware, the four-time All-Pro and nine-time Pro Bowler who retired Monday after 12 seasons with the Cowboys and Broncos. The MMQB spoke with Ray about his mentor and friend.

ROBERT KLEMKO: Did the retirement catch you by surprise?

SHANE RAY: I understood that it would hinge on his belief in what he could still do. He made the best decision for him.

KLEMKO: How did he impact your career?

RAY: You always hear the horror stories about guys getting to the league and having a veteran there who gives him the cold shoulder. But for me it was the opposite. From the day I got there we would work on hand drills after practice, or watch that extra 15 minutes of film. He helped me work on my technique every day. He told me I was going to be great and I didn't have a choice if it was up to him, so he pushed me to be a better me every day. Even when I beat a guy and got a sack in practice, he always found a way to critique it and make me better. That just shows his leadership.

KLEMKO: How did he impact the way you approached the game off the field?

RAY: For one thing, he taught me the ins and outs of how to eat right. I would talk to him about his breakfast, how and when he eats, supplements and vitamins. When I first came into the league, I was eating Wendy's and McDonald's. I wasn't eating how somebody who is invested in his body should eat. When I came to the Broncos I realized Von and DeMarcus had chefs. They ate during certain times. All that was new to me. Slowly I started adding it to my repertoire. You'd be surprised how many things I took from DeMarcus and added to my game. It helped me make the leap that I made.

KLEMKO: He and Peyton Manning spoke before Super Bowl 50. What do you recall about that?

RAY: I remember how emotional it was. He brought up the Lombardi trophy and talked about how iron sharpens iron. He talked about the struggle that we went through and the team was built and how we all bonded together to become what we were. Just to see the emotion on his and Peyton's face when they spoke to the team is something I'll never forget, because those are legends. I never thought that I would see Peyton or DeMarcus Ware choke up, but it showed the commitment and dedication these guys had. When that happened and I was a rookie it showed me how serious the game was and how

much the legends invest in the game and this league. You take it for granted until you get in a room with a guy like that.

KLEMKO: He seemed to be the most accessible guy in the locker room, from a media standpoint. Was he like that with everybody?

RAY: Yes ... he never focused on one group. He didn't just give knowledge to me, or the outside linebackers. You would see DeMarcus go over to the offensive linemen and be like, hey man, I can tell with your stance you're about to do this, and this is how I would beat that. He's always trying to find a way to be a voice and leader in the locker room. He's the definition of how a vet should carry himself and how a leader should carry himself.

KLEMKO: What was your favorite off field moment with him?

RAY: My personal favorite moment was during Super Bowl week and that whole experience. Our room was a lot of laughter and jokes. We always have fun with the personalities in there. We're all in there joking, and I said if DeMarcus fell over he'd need Life Alert. Then Von stole my joke and did it on the Ellen Degeneres Show.

Everybody dished it out, but it was like a brotherhood... I was DeMarcus's rookie. So I would come in the room, and he'd be like, OK, I need you to go get a bonsai tree. Where am I going to get a bonsai tree? Falling asleep in rookie meetings and having DeMarcus and Von take pictures of me and post them online. I'll cherish all those memories, because those are my big brothers, and they helped me come into the league and become the player I am today.

KLEMKO: And your favorite on-field memory?

RAY: DeMarcus works with me every day. This season when we would be a one-two punch, as soon as we would come to the sideline we were talking. OK, what do you see? What keys are you going off? We would come to the sideline and try to figure out how to beat that tackle. One game he told me to do a move, and it worked. I got a sack and I'm running to the sideline and he's standing right there with that big smile with his hands out. That's my favorite moment.

I talked to him a while back, and I didn't know what was going to happen, but he said in the future he would still call me when he watched games and break down my game. He's someone who honestly and truly wanted others to be great and be happy. I couldn't have asked for a better situation and a better mentor coming into the league.

# Five early moves that will significantly impact 2017 NFL season

By Jeff Chadiha  
NFL.com  
March 15, 2017

The NFL's official calendar year isn't even a week old, and already we've had enough moves to fill an entire offseason. The New England Patriots are still competing as if the Super Bowl never ended. The Houston Texans are back in a familiar place, with their eyes on a new option under center. Even Green Bay general manager Ted Thompson -- a man who usually shies away from gambling big in free agency -- has stepped out of his comfort zone with a couple recent signings to improve his offense.

The point to be made here is that it's never too early to start thinking about how all this movement will affect what ultimately happens on the field this coming fall. It's one thing to talk about an assortment of transactions in March. It's quite another to think about what they'll all mean come September. So here is a quick summary of the five offseason decisions -- thus far -- that will have the greatest impact on the 2017 NFL season ...

## 1) New England Patriots trade for Brandin Cooks

The Patriots ended last season in impressive fashion by overcoming a 25-point second-half deficit to beat Atlanta in Super Bowl LI. Now they're doing something equally jaw-dropping in the offseason: displaying an aggressive mentality that indicates this team will do anything to stay on top.

If this were any other team giving up a first- and a third-round pick for Cooks and the New Orleans Saints' fourth-round pick in this year's draft, you might think this was a hefty price to pay for a speedy receiver with three seasons of NFL experience. Since it's the Patriots, it reeks of genius. New Orleans was eager to move Cooks because Michael Thomas was a rookie sensation and the Saints need to improve their defense. Patriots head coach Bill Belichick wants to get as many weapons around quarterback Tom Brady as possible, and here's a young talent who produced 78 receptions for 1,173 yards and eight touchdowns in 2016.

The Patriots fielded the third-best scoring offense in the NFL last season. Imagine what they'll do with Cooks joining a receiving corps that will include Julian Edelman, Chris Hogan, Malcolm Mitchell, Danny Amendola and a healthy Rob Gronkowski at tight end. It's just not fair.

## 2) Houston Texans dump Brock Osweiler

Give the Texans credit for this much: They knew when to cut and run from a mistake. They went all-in on Osweiler last offseason, giving him \$37 million in guaranteed money because they thought he could be the answer to their quarterback problems. By the end of the year -- one that saw the Texans win a second straight AFC South title -- they'd already given up on him.

However, the Texans aren't high on this list because they sent Osweiler and a second-round pick to Cleveland in an obvious salary dump. It's because of what that move could mean for their quarterback situation going forward. It's no secret that the Texans are interested in acquiring Dallas quarterback Tony Romo. It's just a matter of how they hope to make that happen. There have been reports that

Romo was on the verge of being released last week, but he's still on the Dallas roster right now. That means Cowboys owner Jerry Jones is clearly willing to wait to see how badly some team wants a quarterback who already said goodbye to Dallas.

The smart money says Romo winds up in Houston with a strong defense and some fleet-footed offensive weapons. If that happens -- and he stays healthy -- the Texans will be really, really good.

### 3) Green Bay Packers upgrade the tight end position

That deafening noise you heard coming from northern Wisconsin last week was the sound of endless Packers fans uttering their gratitude for a free-agent signing. It's well-known in those parts that general manager Ted Thompson prefers to focus on building his teams through the draft while rarely investing big on the open market. Well, Thompson broke his tendencies early this offseason by quickly signing tight ends Martellus Bennett and Lance Kendricks. These additions mean Thompson is finally doing what Packers fans have been praying for him to do: He's giving star quarterback Aaron Rodgers more weapons. These moves also suggest that Green Bay might be more open to using multiple-tight end formations in the coming year.

The Packers have been one of the worst teams in the league when it comes to utilizing the tight end. However, the success former Packers TE Jared Cook enjoyed in the second half of last season might have been a revelation that opened Thompson's mind to a different way of thinking. Last season alone, Bennett (formerly with the Pats) and Kendricks (Rams) generated 105 receptions between them. If they can create that same production in Green Bay, you'll hear even more collective cheers coming from that part of the NFL.

### 4) Tampa Bay Buccaneers sign DeSean Jackson

Jackson had plenty of suitors, but he made a wise move by signing with Tampa Bay. The 30-year-old wide receiver still has plenty of speed to stretch defenses. Now he's joining an offense that features a third-year quarterback who is quickly coming into his own (Jameis Winston) and a fourth-year wide receiver who already has emerged as a Pro Bowl talent (Mike Evans). Jackson's arrival gives Winston a legitimate home-run threat, as he's averaged 17.7 yards per catch during his nine-year career and he's surpassed the 1,000-yard mark in three of the last four seasons. Jackson also should help Tampa Bay balance its passing attack. Last season, Winston targeted Evans on 173 of his attempts. The next-closest Bucs receiver in that category (Adam Humphries) saw 83 passes sent in his direction.

There are still a few things for Tampa Bay to figure out, but this felt like a team on the rise in the second half of 2016. It finished 9-7 and was still in the hunt for a playoff spot late in the year. The Bucs already had some nice pieces to feel good about heading into the offseason. Now -- especially while competing in a division that houses the last two NFC champions in Atlanta and Carolina -- they are sending a clear message that their offense will be more dangerous this coming fall.

### 5) Kansas City Chiefs lock up Eric Berry on a long-term deal

The only surprise here is that it took an entire year for the Chiefs to lock up their All-Pro free safety. They couldn't get that done last offseason -- after Berry had played an inspirational season after beating cancer -- and Berry had made it clear that he would rather sit out than play under a franchise tag for a second consecutive year.

By the way, this isn't just about Kansas City making Berry the league's highest-paid safety (with a six-year, \$78 million deal). It's about the Chiefs locking up the most respected, inspirational player in that locker room, and a player who became a true game-changer in 2016. Berry became better at generating turnovers -- some of which directly led to victories -- while also continuing to be a strong veteran presence in K.C. The Chiefs are already seeing a change in their leadership, as talented, more combustible Pro Bowlers like cornerback Marcus Peters and tight end Travis Kelce are becoming more comfortable speaking their minds publicly. Head coach Andy Reid will need a steadying presence like Berry to help this team navigate through whatever adversity it encounters next season.

# “Soft retirement” possible for DeMarcus Ware

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
March 15, 2017

Pass-rusher DeMarcus Ware has retired after 12 seasons in the NFL. That doesn't necessarily mean there won't be a 13th.

Ware, a free agent, can return whenever he wants, for whomever he wants. Appearing on Tuesday's PFT Live, Vic Lombardi of Altitude Sports Network in Denver suggested that it will be a “soft retirement” for Ware, with the player potentially returning at some point later this year.

Indeed, as of a week ago Ware was going to test the market. The offers he received (or didn't receive) convinced him to announce his retirement via social media. Those offers, or the opportunities, could improve as time passes.

Lombardi said that Ware remains in great shape. Back issues have plagued him in recent years, but given the manner in which he performed down the stretch in 2015 (with 4.5 sacks in the team's final four games), a contender come November could be interested in adding Ware to the mix, both for what he can do on the field and how he can mentor younger players.

Ware turns 35 on July 31, and if he spends the next several months getting himself as healthy and fit as possible, he could barnstorm into a hand-picked city with the goal of playing a handful of regular-season games, hitting his stride in the postseason, and potentially walking away with a championship like John Elway, Jerome Bettis, Michael Strahan, and Peyton Manning did.

Whatever Ware does, he's already done enough to join each of them in Canton. With 138.5 career sacks (only one less than Jason Taylor) and a Super Bowl ring on his resume, Ware will be immortalized sooner than later. The only question his football career has reached its final life expectancy.

# Should Denver bring back Osweiler?

By Mike Florio  
Pro Football Talk  
March 15, 2017

During a Monday press conference, Broncos coach Vance Joseph and John Elway faced plenty of questions about a quarterback who has never played for them. They apparently got none about a guy who used to.

Brock Osweiler, drafted by Denver in 2012, left via free agency a year ago. Last week, Houston hot potatoed Osweiler to Cleveland. Now, the Browns plan to cut him if they can't find a sucker to take him off their hands.

So if/when (when) Osweiler is released, would Denver be interested?

Only 12 months ago, the Broncos reportedly offered Osweiler \$16 million per year on a three-season deal. Unless that was merely a face-saving effort to create the impression that they tried to keep a guy they really didn't want, shouldn't they be interested if they can get him for the sixth-year minimum of \$775,000, with Cleveland paying the balance of his \$16 million guaranteed deal?

Of course, the coaching staff has changed and the offense has changed. But they're sticking with Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, at least for now. If G.M. John Elway truly believed that Osweiler was worth \$16 million per year as of last year at this time, surely Elway would cough up less than a million now to get him back.

If the Broncos aren't interested in an Osweiler reunion, that likely tells us all we need to know about what they thought of him then, and what the NFL at large should think of him now. For a guy who showed promise in generating a 5-2 as a starter in 2015 and going toe-to-toe with the 10-0 Patriots and Tom Brady in a prime-time overtime win, the bottom has fallen out, quickly.

In a league where there aren't nearly enough quarterbacks to go around, it's possible that Osweiler's career is on the brink of implosion.