

Broncos have used about half of available cap space in free agency

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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With a week's worth of work in free agency in the books and what could be a 10-player draft class on the horizon, the Denver Broncos still have the salary-cap space to tweak some things, but they have used about half of the available salary-cap space they had when free agency opened on March 9.

They've signed five free agents since March 9 -- guard Ronald Leary, tackle Menelik Watson, defensive lineman Domata Peko, nose tackle Zach Kerr and outside linebacker Kasim Edebali -- and according to Friday's figures at the NFL Players Association, the Broncos have \$20.973 million worth of cap space after their top 51 contracts are calculated against the \$167 million salary cap for each team.

Only a team's top 51 salary-cap figures for the upcoming season count against the salary cap until the rosters go to 53 players just before the regular season begins. At that point all 53 contracts as well as players on injured reserve count against the cap.

The Broncos elected not to engage the option bonus for tackle Russell Okung, which would have added four years to Okung's contract, and they opened free agency north of \$40 million in workable space. Executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway said at the time that the team had enough room to be "involved" in free agency.

Leary and Watson, who will count a combined \$11.7 million against the cap for 2017, have the biggest contracts of the players the Broncos have added thus far.

Denver also has 10 picks in the April draft, including four in the top 101 picks, and five in the top 126 picks. Those 10 picks project to a draft pool of just over \$7 million. Teams must have the salary-cap space to fit the draft pool before the draft opens in order to make any selections.

Take away the current draft pool, and the Broncos have about \$13.5 million in workable cap space to sign any additional free agents without adjusting any of their current contracts. Elway has also consistently said that he doesn't like "to be right up against the cap because you're going to have injuries."

Thanks in part to reworking tackle Donald Stephenson's deal (and not releasing him) and structuring Okung's deal as it was, the Broncos have managed their salary-cap business effectively with little "dead money" against this year's cap. "Dead money" is the salary-cap term for players no longer on the roster.

At the moment, Darius Kilgo, who was released late last season, has the biggest dead money charge at \$55,778 against the cap. The Broncos have seven other players with dead money charges, but none of those is for more than \$6,700.

49ers sign linebacker Dekoda Watson to 3-year deal

By Staff

Associated Press

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The San Francisco 49ers have signed free agent linebacker Dekoda Watson to a three-year contract.

The team announced the move on Friday night.

Watson, a seven-year NFL veteran who spent the last two seasons with Denver, is a special teams standout. He led the Broncos with 11 tackles on special teams last year in just nine games.

In 89 career games, Watson has 88 tackles on defense, four sacks, four passes defensed, four fumble recoveries and three forced fumbles to go along with 50 special teams tackles.

He was a seventh-round pick out of Florida State by Tampa Bay in 2010, and played his first four seasons with the Buccaneers. He has also spent time with Jacksonville, Dallas and New England.

Behind the scenes: How NFL teams fit roster under salary cap

By Howard Fenderich
Associated Press
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When the Packers gave Brett Favre the NFL's first \$100 million contract in 2001 - well, first "\$100 million contract," because, like so many deals in the league, it wasn't ultimately worth the advertised amount - the team structured it to create extra space under the salary cap for other signings.

So other players' signings were put on hold by the Packers until Favre's could be finalized.

Easier said than done.

"He was tough to reach. When he's off in the woods, hunting or fishing, it's hard to find him," recalled Andrew Brandt, who managed Green Bay's cap then as a team VP. "And we had all these other guys lined up, and I couldn't do their deals until we found him. So that was a very stressful time."

Such behind-the-scenes machinations take place all the time in the NFL, where the salary cap, which grew to \$167 million per club for the coming season, factors into every roster-shaping decision. As free agents search for deals, the amount of money they're able to obtain is dependent on several variables, of course. None is as crucial as how the cap would be affected.

Before spending season began, front offices studied their own players and finances to figure out their needs. They also examined how other teams handle cap space.

They looked at who they have, who they wanted to keep, who they would need to release, how contracts might be restructured to free up money, what veterans might be available from elsewhere, what the draft (and its cheaper contracts) might offer.

"I'm not a believer in doing things on the fly. I can sleep at night once I have every scenario covered. 'The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry' is kind of the mantra," former Dolphins general manager Dennis Hickey said. "Yes, we had a plan, but we all needed to know it may not go perfect and we needed to know what to do if it didn't go our way."

A look at how cap management works:

DECIDE WHERE YOU STAND

"Are you a playoff team? Then maybe you just have to make a few tweaks," former Broncos GM Ted Sundquist said. "If you missed the playoffs, you have to decide: Are we too young or too old? Do I have some young guys that we can wait on and hope they develop? Or are we on the other side of the hill and we have to make hard decisions with some aging veterans?"

There is another category, of course.

"The bottom-feeders," Sundquist called them. "Constant changing of coaches, coordinators. Never finding progress."

DETERMINE WHAT YOU HAVE

As teams assess rosters, Hickey said, "The starting point is your quarterback situation: Do you have a franchise guy? An OK veteran? An unproven youngster?"

Teams look at the full roster, applying a calculus of contributions versus contract.

"You listen to your scouts and your coaches, independently of each other," Sundquist said. "But you also have to cover your ears and block out noise, people in the organization - it can be the owner, but I didn't have that problem in Denver - saying, 'Well, so-and-so, who's a Hall of Famer, said this on ESPN the other day.'"

HOW AND WHEN TO SPEND

It's not just about having room under the cap. It's also about having cash available.

"Fans don't necessarily get this one - and I don't think the media always does, either. You have rich teams and poor teams. Everybody's playing with 'Monopoly money,' so to speak, but it matters when the cash arrives," Sundquist said. "Maybe we offer \$20 million in the first year, but it's a \$10 million payment right away, \$5 million in November, another \$5 million in February, when there are season-ticket renewals and money is coming from other sources. And then the agent says, 'This other team will give us \$20 million right now in March.'"

Other keys include spacing out when certain deals expire, and figuring out how to divvy up spending by position.

"You would not want Aaron Rodgers or Clay Matthews coming up the same year," Brandt said. "You'd want to stagger your big salaries."

CHECKING OTHER CLUBS

Researching how other teams spend cap money, Brandt noticed better clubs tended to spend evenly on offense and defense.

Sundquist picked up on trends, too.

"I'm paying attention to the Steelers, Giants, Patriots, Packers - teams consistently competing for a Super Bowl," he said. "Should we spend more at defensive end than at safety, for example, based on other teams' success? And I would say, 'Coach, we're not spending enough on the offensive line.' Or 'Coach, I got to tell you, we're not spending enough at wide receiver.'"

Free agency philosophies get copied.

The Steelers generally are less interested in other teams' veterans, preferring what GM Kevin Colbert described as a "draft, develop, keep-our-own" approach.

As clubs follow that model, Colbert said, "you're seeing less and less quality free agents. There's an inherent danger in that, because some of the players who are hitting the market, with the number of dollars that are available, might not be quite worth what they're going to get paid because of the supply and demand."

HANDLING VETERANS

Some veterans are asked to give up money to keep a job. Others are let go.

"Is a player producing at the level you anticipated? Is he going to maintain or improve upon that? Do you see value in that player but you think you need to renegotiate? Is it a player you can approach about changing his deal? Is it an agent you can approach?" Sundquist said. "It's a big thing to ask: 'We're in the fourth year of a five-year deal and we can't carry that. Would you be willing to renegotiate to help the club?' There's a pride factor there."

Brandt remembers being told by Packers GM Ron Wolf to shave millions because they were up against the cap.

Brandt needed to "go to a lot of Packer Hall of Fame players, whether it be LeRoy Butler, Dorsey Levens, Gilbert Brown, Santana Dotson, and sort of get money back. ... You're talking about reductions, not just restructures. Everyone sort of equates those two. But restructures are just moving cap around; reductions are actually taking away money."

WHERE DID THINGS GO WRONG?

Another calculation: How did THAT happen?

"You've got to look back at your evaluation process," Sundquist said, "and say, 'OK, what broke down? Why were we willing to give that guy so much money?' Look at the Brock Osweiler situation, and you say: 'Oh, my gosh. Something broke down in ... their understanding of what Brock was bringing.' That seems to happen quite a bit at the quarterback spot."

Look at the Brock Osweiler situation: 'Oh, my gosh. Something broke down in ... their understanding of what Brock was bringing.' That seems to happen quite a bit at the quarterback spot."

Which NFL teams could have better luck next season?

By Michael Middlehurst-Schwartz

USA Today

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Parsing luck from skill can be a difficult task when assessing an NFL team's season, but there's little question that some stand to benefit from good fortune while others are set off course by a handful of bad breaks.

In honor of St. Patrick's Day, we took a look at five teams who could enjoy a significant swing if they don't fall prey to random chance again this season. But what constitutes luck in the NFL?

Three factors stood out as possible contributors to a team's fortune. Injuries are to be expected in a general sense, but a year of widespread losses can often be an outlier. Bad records in one score games can also be an indicator of luck, or at least a possible regression to the mean. And while some groups are more turnover-prone based on their tendencies, teams lagging behind the rest of the league can get a boost from random chance involved with some giveaways or takeaways.

These teams can't depend on those factors alone for improvement, but merely breaking even could contribute to a more fruitful season.

Los Angeles Chargers

Perhaps the season-opener served as a harbinger for the franchise's fate in what would become its final season in San Diego. In a 33-27 overtime loss to the Chiefs in which they gave up a 21-point lead, the Chargers also watched as wide receiver Keenan Allen suffered a season-ending torn anterior cruciate ligament. Close losses and injuries came to be two of the defining themes of the 5-11 season.

The Chargers finished the season with a league-high 21 players on injured reserve, including Allen, cornerback Jason Verrett, linebacker Manti Te'o and running back Danny Woodhead. The team's first seven losses (and nine total) were all by eight points or fewer, though it also won four of its games by the same margin. If the Chargers can avoid another calamitous run on both fronts next season, the first season in Los Angeles should be a little more even-keeled.

Jacksonville Jaguars

Owner Shad Khan wasn't keen to his team's shortcomings on bad luck, as he fired coach Gus Bradley late in a 3-13 campaign that fell well short of expectations after a free agency spending spree. But the promotion of Doug Marrone to head coach and return of Tom Coughlin, this time in the front office, both suggest that Jacksonville brass doesn't believe it's too far off from a breakthrough.

Quarterback Blake Bortles has been turnover prone, with 51 interceptions in three years. But last year featured some bizarre bounces, including back to back weeks in which he was picked off after the ball deflected off his intended target's foot. With an emerging defense, Marrone may look to put Bortles in more low-risk situations that would help Jacksonville improve on a -16 turnover differential that was third-worst in the NFL. The Jaguars also went 2-8 in games decided by eight points or fewer.

Philadelphia Eagles

Carson Wentz and Doug Pederson took the NFL by surprise in the opening weeks of their debut season, as the rookie quarterback and coach helped key a 4-2 start with wins over the Pittsburgh Steelers and Minnesota Vikings. Then the offense stalled out at midseason, a struggle that coincided with a 10-game ban for right tackle Lane Johnson.

Suspensions are not tantamount to injuries in terms of luck, and Wentz must find a way over the rookie wall (16 touchdowns, 14 interceptions, nine fumbles) he hit last year. But newly signed Alshon Jeffery can win the 50-50 balls that last year's underwhelming supporting cast couldn't, while Torrey Smith's deep speed will make defenses respect more facets of the passing game rather than waiting to pounce on short-to-intermediate throws. Also boding well for Philadelphia: the team finished with a +36 point differential (second best of all losing teams) despite an imposing schedule, and it went 1-6 in games decided by eight points or fewer.

Minnesota Vikings

A devastating non-contact knee injury to Teddy Bridgewater was enough to blow up the Vikings' plans one week before the season, and the hits kept on coming for a beleaguered offense. Running back Adrian Peterson was sidelined for most of the season, while offensive tackles Matt Kalil, Andre Smith and Jake Long were all lost for the year. Even Mike Zimmer wasn't safe, as the Vikings coach missed a game in December after undergoing emergency surgery to repair a detached retina.

Latavius Murray might not be able to single-handedly lift a running game that ranked last with a historically woeful 3.2 yards per carry. But having a fully healthy offensive line, with Riley Reiff and Mike Remmers stepping in for Kalil and Smith, could have a ripple effect on the rest of the offense. Sam Bradford, meanwhile, will have a full offseason rather than a couple of weeks to settle in for a potential second season as Bridgewater's fill-in. More reliability from the kicking game could also prove integral after Blair Walsh's shaky year shrunk the team's margin for error.

Chicago Bears

General manager Ryan Pace likely didn't envision Matt Barkley as a starter in 2016 when he signed the heretofore journeyman to the Bears' practice squad in September. By November, however, Barkley had to take over the reins to an already depleted team (19 players finished the year on injured reserve) with Jay Cutler and Brian Hoyer sidelined.

The Bears' problems extended well beyond quarterback, and Mike Glennon is something of a mystery box option with just 18 starts in his career. But a healthier group with improved deficit should help the team close out the games it couldn't in 2016, as it went just 1-6 in games decided by eight points or fewer. More help could also come from turnover improvements. Though the -20 differential was inflated by Barkley's late-season interception spree, the Bears had some of the worst luck on fumbles with just three defensive recoveries and 12 lost on offense.

2017 NFL Mock Draft: Saints overhaul D, take Derek Barnett and Haason Reddick

By Jared Dubin
CBSSports.com
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We're over a week into the free agency period now, and the changes all around the league are sure to send ripples up and down draft boards. Needs for the teams at the top and even the middle of the draft have stayed relatively stable since this time last week, but the teams near the bottom have seen some shakeups. Late changes abound in this Mock Draft 5.0.

1. Cleveland Browns

Myles Garrett, DE/OLB, Texas A&M: Garrett is going No. 1, unless something weird happens.

2. San Francisco 49ers

Solomon Thomas, DE, Stanford: Between the Stanford connection, Thomas' athletic testing at the combine, and all the noise around Thomas heading to San Francisco, this seems like where the No. 2 pick is heading.

3. Chicago Bears

Jonathan Allen, DL, Alabama: There are few better ways to build a defense than by assembling a strong front. Allen has the athleticism and flexibility to move around a bit, and he'll help Chicago's defense right away.

4. Jacksonville Jaguars

Marshon Lattimore, CB, Ohio State: As we said last week, the Jags have spent a ton of money assembling a defensive front and have playmakers at the second level, but adding a third corner like Lattimore could take things to another level. Teams have three on the field pretty much at all times anyway.

5. Tennessee Titans (from L.A. Rams)

Jamal Adams, SS, LSU: Adams slides in and makes plays for a Tennessee secondary that badly needs somebody who can do so.

6. New York Jets

Deshaun Watson, QB, Clemson: Whether Jay Cutler winds up in New York or not, he's not their quarterback of the future. Watson can be. Eventually, the Jets need to find someone with real talent at the position.

7. Los Angeles Chargers

Malik Hooker, FS, Ohio State: The Chargers still need to replace what they lost when Eric Weddle left for Baltimore last offseason. Hooker slides in nicely.

8. Carolina Panthers

Leonard Fournette, RB, LSU: Fournette is the kind of punishing runner that fits well in Carolina's scheme and can take some of the goal-line running pressure off Cam Newton, who can use the physical break.

9. Cincinnati Bengals

Reuben Foster, LB, Alabama: There might be some concern about Foster after his dismissal from the combine but he's still a top-10 talent. The bet here is still that the talent wins out over other concerns.

10. Buffalo Bills

Corey Davis, WR, Western Michigan: We had Washington speedster John Ross here last week, but Davis is the more complete receiver. With Sammy Watkins still dealing with his foot issues, zeroing in on someone that combines size and speed makes more sense than taking a pure burner, especially given Ross' injury history.

11. New Orleans Saints

Derek Barnett, DE, Tennessee: The Saints added another pick late in the first with the Brandin Cooks trade, and they'll likely use both to address their holes on defense. They pick up a pass-rusher early, and some second-level help late.

12. Cleveland Browns (from Philadelphia)

Mitch Trubisky, QB, North Carolina: If the Patriots don't give in and send Jimmy Garoppolo to the Browns for a second-rounder, they use their second pick of the first round on a quarterback.

13. Arizona Cardinals

DeShone Kizer, QB, Notre Dame: The Cardinals' window may have officially closed after Calais Campbell and Tony Jefferson walked in free agency, so they need to find the quarterback that will take over for Carson Palmer. Kizer has the size, arm, and tape to fit the bill.

14. Philadelphia Eagles (from Minnesota)

Malik McDowell, DT, Michigan State: The Eagles' signings of Alshon Jeffery and Torrey Smith knock a wide receiver off the board here. Instead, they swing over to McDowell, who helps make up for the loss of Bennie Logan to Kansas City. Given his build, he can play tackle or end for Philly.

15. Indianapolis Colts

Dalvin Cook, RB, Florida State: Cook's versatility gives the Colts the kind of weapon they haven't had out of the backfield during the Andrew Luck era. He can break off big gains via the run or the pass and play on all three downs.

16. Baltimore Ravens

O.J. Howard, TE, Alabama: Howard isn't just any tight end. He's a ridiculous athlete and matchup nightmare that can give the Baltimore offense an explosiveness it has lacked in recent years.

17. Washington Redskins

Zach Cunningham, OLB, Vanderbilt: Washington lost both its top receivers and free agency and there's still uncertainty around Kirk Cousins, but run defense is still its biggest issue. Cunningham can come in right away and solidify an important area.

18. Tennessee Titans

John Ross, WR, Washington: The Titans can't rightly let Marcus Mariota enter Year 3 with Tajae Sharpe and Rishard Matthews as his top two wideouts. Ross would open up the field for everybody, in addition to being a great fit with Mariota's passing style.

19. Tampa Bay Buccaneers

Obi Melifonwu, S, Connecticut: Melifonwu tested off the charts at the combine and seems firmly in the mix as a potential first-rounder. Tampa could use a complement to the recently-signed J.J. Wilcox at the safety position, and an athlete like Melifonwu would be a good fit.

20. Denver Broncos

Ryan Ramczyk, OT, Wisconsin: Romo, Siemian, Lynch, whoever: they need blind-side protection.

21. Detroit Lions

Taco Charlton, DE, Michigan: We'll keep saying it: When you sack the quarterback only 26 times in a season, it's safe to say you need help getting after the passer.

22. Miami Dolphins

David Njoku, TE, Miami: Adam Gase loves athletic tight ends that can stretch the field and box out in the red zone. That's Njoku, who can team with Julius Thomas in two-tight sets whenever Thomas is healthy enough to play and be the No. 1 guy when Thomas is on the sideline.

23. New York Giants

Cam Robinson, OT, Alabama: The Giants signed D.J. Fluker last week, but he's apparently set to play right guard and not tackle. Take Robinson, kick Ereck Flowers over to the right side, and move forward with a fully upgraded offensive front.

24. Oakland Raiders

Marlon Humphrey, CB, Alabama: Oakland's offense is ready for prime time, but even after last offseason's remodeling, the defense needs work. Humphrey can help solidify the back end by adding an element of physicality on the outside.

25. Houston Texans

Patrick Mahomes, QB, Texas Tech: The Tony Romo situation could continue to drag out, and if things are still up in the air on draft day, they could just snag Mahomes instead.

26. Seattle Seahawks

Garett Bolles, OT, Utah: The Seahawks chased T.J. Lang and signed Luke Joeckel, but still need offensive line help. Bolles could bump Joeckel inside to guard, and would be a great fit for the style of running game Seattle utilizes. Tom Cable would love him.

27. Kansas City Chiefs

Mike Williams, WR, Clemson: Kansas City has Jeremy Maclin and Tyreek Hill at wideout, but Williams provides a level of size and physicality neither of those players has. Given Alex Smith's predilections, Williams would be a good fit.

28. Dallas Cowboys

Fabian Moreau, CB, UCLA: We had Sidney Jones here last week, but then he went and suffered an Achilles injury at his pro day. Dallas instead swings to Moreau, who tested out as one of the most athletic defensive backs in this draft and has the kind of size the suddenly DB-needy Cowboys like in the position.

29. Green Bay Packers

Forrest Lamp, OG, Western Kentucky: T.J. Lang has moved on. The Packers have options on the line but most seem like tackles rather than guards. Lamp could slide in as a starter in front of Aaron Rodgers.

30. Pittsburgh Steelers

Jabrill Peppers, S, Michigan: Peppers gives the Steelers a playmaker on the back end of the defense, something they've lacked over the last few years.

31. Atlanta Falcons

Charles Harris, DE, Missouri: If Harris makes it past the Cowboys, it seems unlikely that he'll fall past Atlanta. Dan Quinn could do some stuff with a pass-rush talent like this.

32. New Orleans Saints

Haason Reddick, LB, Temple: The Saints snagged Derek Barnett early, and now add an incredible athlete at linebacker to continue the makeover of their defense.

Why Alabama's Cam Robinson has the potential to be a franchise left tackle

By Chris Burke
Sports Illustrated
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Obviously, there's a lot more to Robinson's Alabama career than can be gleaned in one five-second clip. A few things to notice on this play vs. USC, though, because they help highlight running themes of Robinson's résumé.

1. That initial punch. When Robinson has these one-on-one run blocking opportunities off the snap, he can stagger defenders. There are balance issues created by how aggressively he fires forward (which we'll get into shortly), but so long as he makes contact, he often gets his man back on his heels and generates push.
2. The physical edge. Robinson stood 6'6" and 322 pounds at the Combine. Because of USC's pre-snap movement, Robinson winds up blocking a 235-pound linebacker here — one who's late arriving to his spot. An offensive tackle should win that matchup every time, and Robinson does. He has the same advantage against 270-pound edges, though, and he does not let it go to waste. When Robinson gets his hands inside and locks out a defender, it's exceptionally hard for that defender to push back.
3. The finish ... or lack thereof. This play ends with Uchenna Nwosu shedding Robinson's block. Robinson allows this to happen on a consistent basis, both on passing and running plays. He ends up on the ground quite a bit, too, as his forward drive really requires a defender to lean on.

And so, take all those elements into account and decide where to focus attention on this play. Is it on the uneven balance and failure to bury Nwosu? Or, is it on the fact that Nwosu had no chance at the outset and was a good 5 yards downfield before he freed himself?

The recommendation here is to pay attention to the latter. The negatives stand out with Robinson because the positive plays appear to come so naturally. He is just dominant enough to leave one wanting more. Robinson is at left tackle there, as always. The play turned out to be an incompleting — really, a throwaway snap in a 33-14 Alabama win over Texas A&M.

However, the casualness of it all for Robinson is sort of the point. The player he's blocking? Myles Garrett, almost a lock to be the first player selected in this year's draft. Granted, this was one of the games in which Garrett was most hindered by an ankle injury, but Robinson toyed with him on that Jalen Hurts attempt.

Robinson was quick in his drop step, covered a ton of ground and flat-out engulfed Garrett. You won't necessarily see this play on any of Robinson's draft highlight reels because he didn't send Garrett flying, but this is what he can do. He is big enough and skilled enough to make very difficult tasks look smooth.

Textbook. He drew an assignment other than Garrett on the above play, but the outcome was the same. Robinson absorbed an initial punch, then walked his man along the exterior of the pocket, allowing his

QB to set and throw. (Side note: Alabama's entire O-line barely budged an inch there, so ... yeah, that team is good.)

What's even more encouraging for any team considering Robinson is that pass protection is arguably the weaker aspect of his game. As a mauler in a ground attack, Robinson should be able to have a significant impact immediately for an NFL team.

Again, Robinson meets Garrett and drives off his mark. Remember what I mentioned before? It's all evident on this play, up to and including Garrett shaking off Robinson late to pull back into the action.

I'll ask one more time on that point: So what? It would be great to see Robinson end every snap by driving his opponent into the ground, but if he clears run lanes and holds pass blocks for four or five seconds, isn't that the important factor?

Robinson is a menace on down blocks, and he has the awareness/athleticism pairing necessary to work the second level with effectiveness. Throughout his college career, Robinson also tended to raise his game against elite players, like Garrett. While ideally he would keep it full throttle all the time, being able to raise his game to his opponent's level bodes well given what he'll face in the NFL.

"It may just be the competition," Robinson said at the Combine. "If you're going against a guy you know who's a great player, as a natural competitor it brings out the best in anybody."

The task for his NFL team will be improving upon what's there — fixing the issues from both motor and technique perspectives, so Robinson can max out as an offensive tackle. Because his Alabama performance wasn't all sunshine and roses.

The edge rusher smacking Robinson there is Derek Barnett, yet another SEC prospect destined for the first round this year. Most times, Robinson is adept reacting to the snap and getting into his set. But there were a handful of times per game where he'd be out of sorts — either a step slow, like on that Barnett sack, or prone to taking pre-snap penalties (false starts or lining up too far into the backfield).

The aforementioned balance problem also falls under the "needs repair" category. Robinson does not have much issue working back in pass protection, but his torso gets way ahead of his feet when he's run blocking. Hence, those falls to the ground.

Then there's the footwork. He is excellent on those multi-level blocks, but he doesn't always have the speed to get out on the edge.

Robinson may never be a blocker on the move like a Ryan Ramczyk or a Garrett Bolles — his game best translates to a man-blocking system, with an emphasis on the power game. Nothing else in his body of work is beyond repair.

And the starting point is encouraging, if perhaps a bit below the top tackles of past drafts. Robinson has the length to play the blindside in the NFL, as well as the strength to be a plus-run blocker and the footwork to drop and protect his QB.

He has flaws, like all the other offensive tackles in this class. He also has the potential to be a franchise left tackle.

Broncos in same questionable position as last offseason

By Mark Knudson
The Coloradoan
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One year ago, the Denver Broncos smiled gratefully as future Hall of Famer Peyton Manning announced his well-earned retirement. Two days later, they were shocked when backup quarterback Brock Osweiler signed a huge free agent contract with the Houston Texans.

Suddenly, the champs were extra thin at the most important position on the field.

Ultimately, Denver signed free agent journeyman Mark Sanchez and later drafted prized rookie Paxton Lynch to fill the quarterback void. It didn't work. Eventually, Sanchez was released, Lynch was deemed not ready, and the reins were handed over to third-stringer Trevor Siemian.

We all know how that turned out.

So after missing the playoffs and watching Head Coach Gary Kubiak retire at the end of the 2016 season, the Broncos now find themselves in a situation that's profoundly different than it was just 54 weeks ago. The question is, are the Broncos better off now, or then?

They remain (for the moment) in the same spot they were in under center. Lynch didn't get much playing time, so he's probably not quite ready yet, and Siemian — severely limited in talent and nursing a surgically repaired non-throwing shoulder — is no one's idea of a franchise quarterback. Still, you could make the case that just having Lynch on the roster at the moment puts the Broncos a step ahead of where they were after Osweiler bolted a year ago.

Elsewhere? The offensive line was not great in 2015 and slid backward in 2016. It's hard to look at the unit's struggles as being just about a lack of talent. Denver has talented lineman. Perhaps more attention should be paid to the fact that the O-line was asked to run the out-dated zone blocking scheme last season. Rules changes that eliminated cut blocking in the NFL made zone blocking much much harder to accomplish than it was during the glory days of Terrell Davis and company.

You could make a case that the 2016 O-line was actually more talented than the 2015 unit, man-for-man. So looking at the 2017 season six months out, are these guys in a better position now than last year at this time? Probably so.

Which brings us to the coaching situation: Better or worse?

Kubiak's retirement meant an overhaul of the entire coaching staff. On the offensive side, that's a good thing. The system was outdated and ineffective. Most fans would take new offensive coordinator Mike McCoy over Rick Dennison any day. It will be interesting to see how Lynch and the line respond to a new, more modern scheme. So you could once again make the case that Denver is in a better place offensively today than one year ago.

And there's the defense.

The loss of defensive coordinator Wade Phillips is unquestionably the biggest step backwards for the Broncos from one year ago. Wade may be the best assistant coach in the NFL, period. Replacing him with a guy, Joe Woods, who's never been a DC before is borderline scary. You're wearing orange-tinted glasses if you see the Broncos defense being as great without Wade as they were with him. So no, they are not better off on the defensive side than they were one year ago. Far from it.

As far as the head coaching position, Vance Joseph comes highly regarded, but 100 percent unproven. People who point to Kubiak and say "the Broncos won the Super Bowl with a first-year head coach" have consumed too much orange Kool-Aid. Kubiak was an experienced, veteran assistant and head coach. There's no comparison to be made with Joseph.

This could very well turn out to be another Josh McDaniels situation. Joseph is a rookie in every sense of the word. Rookies make mistakes. Or maybe not. Having McCoy — most recently the coach of the San Diego Chargers — back on staff should help. Truth is, we have no idea in March what kind of coach Vance Joseph will be. None.

So overall: Are the Broncos better off today than they were last year at this time? It's a question that's virtually impossible to answer, but one that will keep the radio talk show hosts busy all summer.

Colorado woman, and Broncos' mascot rider, recognized for contributions to Arabian horse industry

By Staff

The Fence Post

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When Ann Judge talks about the highlight of her equestrian career, she doesn't mention stampeding into Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif., for Super Bowl 50, on the back of Broncos mascot Thunder.

She's not sifting through the times she's led her horse to a victory in English or Western pleasure classes or still buzzing from her recognition as the Arabian Professional and Amateur Horseman's Association "Horsewoman of the Year" on Feb. 26.

Instead, she brings up the showmanship portion of an Arabian horse show she judged last year. The competitors were kids, and they had no idea what they were doing. She remembers the terrified looks on their little faces when she stopped them during the show, walked into the show ring and asked if she could teach them the pattern they should take around the ring with their animals.

One by one, the kids fell into line behind her like little ducklings. They scuttled on their two feet, like their horses would prance on four, did 360-degree turns when she asked and even broke into a run at the spot their horse would need to trot.

After their little exercise, the kids didn't look scared of the big, bad judge anymore — instead, they looked excited. The person they most wanted to impress had taken the time to notice them.

"It made my summer," she said.

Judge knows how much it means to have those interactions. She remembers how nerve-wracking the arena could be when she was a little girl and how important the judges' feedback was. Those moments gave her the chance to learn. The fresh-faced junior equestrians teach her something new, too.

Even now, decades after her father bought her first pony — a mean little guy, she said — Judge thinks the best part of the equestrian world is learning.

NEW CHALLENGES

She rattles off the things she knows she does well — competing, training, judging and of course, riding Thunder — in the same breath that she talks about her new challenges. Recently, Judge took up Western Dressage, a discipline in which both horse and rider progressively move through different levels of training to perfect certain movements and traits. Instead of competing in the same ring at the same time as the other competitors, it's just you and your horse, and you're only looking to bring the best out of each other, Judge said.

"It's making me have to learn and think about the show ring in a different way," she said. "For me, it's really stimulating to be able to go from one discipline to another. It's really making me learn a lot."

Dressage is the perfect way for an established equestrian to keep things fresh — that's why she sees many of her colleagues turning to it after years in the business, too. It teaches them to pay attention again and it helps them reconnect with a horse that may have gotten too lackadaisical for other events after years of practice.

"I'm a lazy person by nature," she said with a laugh, before rattling off all the ways the sport keeps her on her toes. "(Dressage) makes me a more interesting person."

She also hopes to take new, off-the-wall adventures to keep her skills fresh, even though she's already proven a star in her field. This year, she wants to start focusing more on trail-riding, and hopes to ride a horse through some of the most beautiful country in Colorado. For her 60th birthday in 2018, Judge plans to ride a burro through the Grand Canyon.

AWARD WINNER

The variety in Judge's repertoire is part of what earned her the "Horsewoman of the Year" award from the APAHA. Recipients of the award are chosen because their background includes both competition and community service involving Arabians. The second piece of that is what really stands out to Judge — she's thankful she's had the chance to show her community how much of a difference Arabians can make.

Arabians are often considered emotional, or "hot," as many trainers put it, but Judge said it's that emotional streak that made her fall in love with the breed. Pointing to a picture of Thunder, her eyes tear up.

"Look at this horse's eyes. They are so expressive," she said. "I really want a relationship and a partnership with the horses that I ride, and I've just always felt that Arabians, with that emotional connection, just feed that."

Judge said without Thunder or his owner, Sharon Magness Blake, the APAHA award wouldn't have been possible. It's because of them that an Arabian horse is a face for philanthropy. She and Magness Blake take Thunder to visit schools, libraries, hospitals and more to bring a little — well, big — bit of sunshine into peoples' days.

"(Thunder) has walked through hotel kitchens to get to people. He's met President Bill Clinton, Garth Brooks and John Elway — and he's pooped in front of all of them," she said with a big laugh that makes the rhinestone fringe hanging from every edge of her blue and orange Western gear shake. Down to her boots, which are worn-in and carry a layer of dust from use, she's representing the team and horse she loves.

When the laugh fades to a smile, Judge glances down at the Super Bowl ring on her finger and launches into her next story, but it's not about her. It's about Peyton Manning and all the hard work he did to be successful in his career. He started working for Super Bowl 50 when he was 5 years old, she said, and now, she's wearing the same ring he is.

"An Arabian horse has afforded me the kind of opportunities that are afforded to so few people," she said. "It's so humbling." ❖

Does Jerry Jones want to keep Tony Romo from playing in Houston?

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
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As far as the NFL's alignment of franchises is concerned, the Cowboys and Texans aren't rivals. As far as the people living in Dallas and Houston are concerned, they are. And that reality could be one of the reasons for the decision of Cowboys owner Jerry Jones to slam the brakes on the plan to release Romo.

From the moment the news emerged that Romo would be released (the post-hoc spin is that he was only told he won't be on the roster in 2017), the reaction among the Dallas media was swift and intense and it became clear that the release wouldn't be the end of a new era of Romo-centric coverage in the Dallas area but the beginning.

So spin it forward. Romo exits Dallas and lands in Houston. And then every outlet in Dallas assigns at least one reporter to cover Romo's year(s) in Houston, forcing America's Team to share eyeballs and ears in its own hometown with the other team from Texas.

Spin it even farther forward. The Texans surge with a healthy Romo, becoming one of the best teams in the AFC. The Cowboys, defense drained by free agency and offense undermined by possible sophomore slumps of Dak Prescott and/or Ezekiel Elliott, regress to the mean. Cowboys fans would be tempted to set aside their silver and blue for the balance of the year and become temporary fans of Romo and the Texans.

That wouldn't be good for business. And Jerry Jones is all about making good business decisions.

Couldn't his concerns be handled via the wink-nod "do-right" approach that the team and the player are supposed to be adopting? This would require Jones to ask Romo not to play for the Texans. And there's a good chance that request eventually would make its way to the media. Which would prove that Jones is worried about a Houston uprising diluting Dallas interest in the Cowboys.

For Jones, creating the impression that he actually cares about the Texans becoming more popular in Dallas and more successful overall could be worse than either thing happening. So he has instead squatted on Romo, waiting for a trade offer that may never materialize, and perhaps hoping an offer never comes from Houston.

I've believed for the last week that Jones hopes an offer will be made to him at the upcoming league meetings in Arizona. The truth could be that Jones plans in Phoenix to make a team like the Broncos a low-ball, face-saving offer that gets the Cowboys some marginal value for Romo — and that ensures he'll never play for the Houston Texans.

AFC West free-agency roundup: Key additions and departures

By Ben Swanson
DenverBroncos.com
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Kansas City Chiefs

Key additions: DT Bennie Logan, DB Marqueston Huff

Key departures: QB Nick Foles, NT Dontari Poe, RB Jamaal Charles

After letting Dontari Poe explore free agency, the popular nose tackle landed in Atlanta with the defending NFC champions. With a hole in the middle of their line, the Chiefs brought aboard defensive tackle Bennie Logan, who spent his first four NFL seasons with the Eagles. Logan was a dependable run-stopper for Philadelphia with 163 tackles and 121 defensive stops, as tracked by Pro Football Focus. Safety Marqueston Huff is an addition for depth in the defensive backfield.

Kansas City didn't have a lot of holes to fill, particularly after they retained safety Eric Berry and guard Laurent Duvernay-Tardif with long-term contract extensions. Nick Foles' departure isn't devastating, but it does leave Kansas City without a reserve quarterback who has thrown a regular-season pass.

Oakland Raiders

Key additions: WR Cordarrelle Patterson, TE Jared Cook, OL Marshall Newhouse

Key departures: RB Latavius Murray, OLB Malcolm Smith, DT Stacy McGee, T Menelik Watson, CB D.J. Hayden, SS Nate Allen, LB Daren Bates

The Raiders' biggest loss is probably Murray, who was Oakland's leading rusher and receiving threat out of the backfield. But the rest of their stable of backs, which included DeAndre Washington and Jalen Richard, also shouldered a significant load of the ground attack last year. If Oakland's not confident in their ability to rely on Washington and Richard, there are options still available in free agency, including Adrian Peterson and Jamaal Charles.

Smith, McGee, Watson, Allen and Hayden are also sizable losses, as they combined for 34 starts last season. McGee was a strong piece of their run defense on the line, but over his career, McGee has played just 30.6 percent of the Raiders' defensive snaps, per Pro Football Focus.

Though Oakland hasn't yet utilized free agency to address any of those departures, they added two offensive pieces with Patterson and Cook. Patterson's a speedster who gives the Raiders a big boost on special teams and another weapon for QB Derek Carr. Cook is probably best known for his stunning last-second catch against Dallas that set up Green Bay for the game-winning field goal in the Divisional Round. He will add to Oakland's group of tight ends that includes Mychal Rivera and Clive Walford.

Los Angeles Chargers

Key additions: OT Russell Okung

Key departures: RB Danny Woodhead, G D.J. Fluker, OT King Dunlap

After an offseason arrest led to King Dunlap's release, the Chargers filled his spot with former Bronco Russell Okung. After struggling to stay healthy for much of his career, Okung showed he could play a full season in 2016, and that consistency is something the Chargers are counting on after multiple offensive line injuries piled up over the past few years.

Though Okung is the Chargers' only signing so far, they made other big moves in re-signing safety Jahleel Addae and assigning the franchise tag to dynamic outside linebacker Melvin Ingram.

Their two biggest free-agency losses were Fluker and Woodhead, who signed with the Giants and Ravens, respectively. Woodhead was a solid reserve running back who was a Swiss-army knife for the Chargers' offense, offering reliable production as rushing and receiving options.