

# Kickin' it with Kiz: Imagine the stink if the Broncos pass on Christian McCaffrey and draft Joe Mixon

By Mark Kiszla  
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Denver needs to pass on misfits in the NFL draft. The Broncos should take running back Christian McCaffrey with the 20th pick in the first round. If Oklahoma's Joe Mixon is available in the late rounds, then take a chance on him.

– Pete, weighing pros and cons

Kiz: Mixon visited Dove Valley headquarters for a chat, which got all of Broncos Country buzzing. Mixon is the most controversial prospect in the 2017 draft, because he punched a woman in the face three years ago, breaking her jaw. And it was all caught on video. We don't need to review the tape to know: Everybody deserves a second chance. But if the Broncos pass on McCaffrey and take Mixon later in the draft, it would cause a big stink.

I'm fine with not drafting Mixon, but talent gets a second chance in this league. If you don't take talent, it beats you. For example: Kansas City Chiefs star Tyreek Hill vs. Denver.

– Joe, NFL draftnik

Kiz: Character doesn't count on the scoreboard. Never has. Never will.

I get drafting Mixon from a football angle. It would be hard to see it, combined with the hiring of Vance Joseph as Broncos coach, as anything but a slight to women, though.

– Boogie, St. Petersburg, Fla.

Kiz: The Broncos would rather be your Super Bowl champs than your role models.

I'm like any other football fan. What Mixon has done only matters if he isn't on your team. I root for the decal on the side on the helmet.

– Eric, Lone Tree

Kiz: While many fans declare athletes should be held to a higher standard and it's a privilege to play in the NFL, how many season-ticket holders would actually surrender their seat privileges if the Broncos drafted Mixon? We all talk a good game. But we are what we do.

I am wondering why the Broncos are saving all this salary-cap space. It feels like the top brass knows this team is still a year away from being important in the Super Bowl chase.

– Adam, Chicago

Kiz: After recruiting guard Ron Leary and doing the rest of his free-agent shopping, John Elway has a smidge under \$21 million left to spend on talent. We aren't too good at math here at Kickin' It Headquarters. But the way we figure it, Elway can pay his draft picks, buy a six-pack of Coors and have just enough left in his piggy bank to also get himself a slightly used QB from Dallas.

And today's parting shot gives credit where credit is due. Forget Nikola Jokic. We all know who's really responsible for the Nuggets' recent winning streak.

Hey, Kiz. Thanks for the winning streak! The Nuggets went undefeated in four games after you called them out for their lackluster play, saying they don't need a coach, they need a babysitter. Not that the team will show appreciation, but if the Nugs make the playoffs, they should thank you for lighting a fire.

– Tim, Golden

# Football, hockey and rings: Broncos OT Michael Schofield and USA Hockey's Kendall Coyne found love in sports

By Nicki Jhabvala  
Denver Post  
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Most of them don't know it yet and the others surely won't admit it, but the 5-foot-2 blonde standing behind all those football players will school them. For the better part of the next two hours she will barely break a sweat, or a smile, as she eases through agility drills, pushes through circuits of free weights and sticks plank after plank after plank at Landow Performance in Centennial.

Those two NFL tight ends who are participating will sooner or later keel over in exhaustion. Those linebackers will be drenched in sweat. Those college players will be counting every second until they can grab a swig of water.

Broncos tackle Michael Schofield and fiancée Kendall Coyne, a forward on the U.S. women's national hockey team, train at Landow Performance in Centennial.

But there's one who knows. That 300-pound offensive lineman standing there in a gray Broncos T-shirt has seen this play out for nearly three years now and he will be the first to tell you it will happen again.

He is Michael Schofield, the Broncos' right tackle and third-round draft pick in 2014.

She is Kendall Coyne, an Olympic silver-medalist with the U.S. women's national hockey team.

And this is a love story that began in a gym at 9 a.m. on a weekday in a Chicago suburb and is renewed most weekday mornings at this gym and at nearby ice arenas.

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Donning a red Chicago Blackhawks jersey with his No. 79 and last name stitched on the back, Schofield glides to the penalty box to chat with a few frigid onlookers at Edge Ice Arena in Littleton.

"You know she's one of the fastest hockey players in the world," he says as sweat drips down his brow. "It's crazy."

It's noon on a Tuesday and Coyne has just begun her second workout of the day with Schofield, following their two-hour training session with Landow. The pair — well, mostly Coyne — has hit the ice, weaving around cones and taking slapshot after slapshot on an empty goal as Ken Klee, a former Avalanche defenseman and U.S. women's hockey coach, watches her every move.

The onlookers' cameras trying to catch her mid-sprint but catch only blurs. Her biggest fan — in both size and ardor — just shakes his head in disbelief.

“She makes it look so easy,” Schofield says.

Coyne, one of the most dominant players in her sport, is about three years removed from earning a silver medal at the 2014 Sochi Games and on this day is mere weeks away from her sixth world championship. Maybe. The U.S. women’s national team announced Wednesday it will sit out the 2017 IIHF World Championships unless USA Hockey increases their wages and benefits.

“We have asked USA Hockey for equitable support as required by the Ted Stevens Amateur Sports Act,” the players said in a statement. “Specifically, we have asked for equitable support in the areas of financial compensation, youth team development, equipment, travel expenses, hotel accommodations, meals, staff, transportation, marketing and publicity.”

The tournament, held in Plymouth, Michigan, about 20 miles northeast of his alma mater in Ann Arbor, was going to be the first time Schofield would see his fiancée compete in a U.S. jersey in person.

The two, who attended the same high in Orland Park, Ill., and reunited while working out in a Chicago-area gym a few years ago, got engaged in January. His offseasons the last two years have included plane rides to Boston to see her compete with Northeastern and Chicago and to train with her in the summer.

“For the last two years when I was in school at Northeastern, we did the long distance,” Coyne says. “It’s not that fun, but you make it work if you love someone.”

They did. In 2015-16, her senior season, Coyne helped Northeastern to its first NCAA Tournament berth while leading the nation in goals (50), goals per game (1.35), points per game (2.27) shorthanded goals (five) and hat tricks (five). The cap on her long list of accolades included the 2016 Patty Kazmaier Memorial Award, the Heisman for women’s hockey.

Weeks before she was honored, Schofield was crowned Super Bowl champion at Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, Calif., the culmination of his first season on the field. The two had reached the top of their respective sports in the span of a month, and would soon unite in Colorado.

Upon graduation, Coyne moved to Colorado while still working part-time in fan development for the Chicago Blackhawks, competing for the Minneapolis Whitecaps and studying to complete her master’s degree online at Northeastern. She attends as many Broncos games as she can — “It’s definitely stressful,” she says. “I think after every game I’d say to him, ‘It’s so much easier playing.’” — and he does the same for her — “They’re physical games,” he says. “Checking is illegal, but I’ve seen many girls get taken out with a check and I’m like, ‘This is insane.’”

Sometimes he gets a taste of it himself, as he takes to the ice with her to train.

“He’s the biggest defenseman I’ll ever go against, so it’s great practice,” she says.

Sometimes, the roles flip. Sometimes she’ll strap on the football pads instead of hockey pads to help Schofield with his tempo as an offensive tackle. Naturally, Coyne plays defensive end.

“I just want to be Von Miller,” she says. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I just try to get behind him.”

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Schofield received his really big ring in June 2016 at a private ceremony inside the Broncos' stadium. More than 190 diamonds and nearly 20 sapphires are spread over yellow gold to commemorate the Broncos Super Bowl victory.

In January, Coyne received her own ring in a secret ceremony at The Plush Horse, an ice cream shop — her favorite ice cream shop — inside a century-old farmhouse in Palos Park, Illinois. Rose petals were strewn across the hardwood floor and in between framed photos of the couple.

She had no idea.

“After I proposed and after she calmed down and started thinking about it, she was like, ‘Wait a minute. How did you pull this all off?’” Schofield recalls.

To announce their engagement, Schofield posted a photo on Instagram of their rings with a plate below that read “Mr. and Mrs.”

That day, so far, has topped all the others — on the ice or the field. But the biggest day is tentatively set for July 2018, squeezed between their training and competition schedules.

“We don’t have many days to choose from as you can imagine,” Schofield says.

The months ahead are already packed as she completes her degree in April and he begins work toward a new season with the Broncos, with a new set of coaches and a new offensive scheme.

But odds are, they’ll find time to keep the love story going, in a gym or at an ice rink around 9 on weekday mornings.

# Good, bad and uncertainty of Broncos free agency

By Mike Klis

9News

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As an offensive guard, Ron Leary didn't generate much excitement during the local offseason news cycle.

If he can move defensive linemen during the fall, though, the Denver Broncos will have chosen wisely for their No. 1 get of the free-agent period.

In truth, Leary wasn't the Broncos' top choice in free agency. He was tied for first with 3-4 defensive end Calais Campbell.

The Broncos had Leary, a left guard from the vaunted offensive line of the Dallas Cowboys, locked up early Wednesday, March 8, the day before the official opening of free agency. The Broncos waited until later Wednesday, March 8, to make their first move on Campbell, the former Denver South High School and Arizona Cardinal star.

The Broncos' bid of \$13 million per year was apparently too much of a hometown discount compared to the \$15 million per year the Jacksonville Jaguars offered Campbell.

The acquisition of Leary, and failure to beat out the cap-rich Jaguars for Campbell, made this a mixed free agent period for the Broncos, who ranked 16th in the 32-team NFL with \$66.7 million in free-agent spending. The Jaguars were first with \$167.97 million.

The five Bronco free-agent acquisitions: Leary (four years, \$36 million), right tackle Menelik Watson (three years, \$18.75 million), nose tackle Domata Peko (two years, \$7.5 million), defensive end Zach Kerr (two years, \$3.25 million) and outside linebacker Kasim Edebali (one year, \$1.2 million).

On the flip side, the Broncos lost five free-agent players who received a combined \$83.5 million worth of contracts: Left tackle Russell Okung (four years, \$53 million); defensive tackle Sylvester Williams (three years, \$16.5 million); cornerback Kayvon Webster (two years, \$8 million); outside linebacker Dekoda Watson (three years, \$6 million) and outside linebacker DeMarcus Ware (retired).

Until Tony Romo is released by the Cowboys, though, the Broncos' free-agent work is incomplete. Romo, a four-time Pro Bowl quarterback, would move the needle like no other free-agent player since Peyton Manning in 2012.

Romo remains property of Cowboys' owner Jerry Jones, though, and until the quarterback is set free, the Broncos are through with their free-agent spending, with the exception of a minimum-type deal to fill needs as they arise.

Even if Romo does become a free agent, the Broncos may still be essentially finished with their free-agent spending and stick with their two young quarterbacks in Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch.

Here's the good, bad and too-early-to-tell aspects of the Broncos' free-agent period:

## The Good

Throughout the 2016 regular season and into the offseason, Bronco followers repeatedly stated the team's priority had to be upgrading its offensive line.

The Broncos then added two starting offensive linemen in Leary and Menelik Watson and the prevailing feeling is Broncos' free agency was a dud.

The men up front may not sell tickets. But they can complete a championship team.

Dollar for dollar, the Broncos believe Leary was the best value in the guard market. Kevin Zeitler was considered the top guard but it took \$12 million a year for Cleveland to sign him. Detroit got T.J. Lang who is older and with some health concerns, for \$9.5 million per.

The Broncos picked up Leary for a \$9 million average.

He will help the Broncos transition from the zone, finesse-type running scheme to more of a one-on-one, power system.

On the other side of the ball, the Broncos also believe Peko, the former longtime Cincinnati Bengal, is a better nose tackle than Williams. In fairness, Williams is best suited for defensive tackle in a 4-3 front. That's what he was drafted for.

Peko is a nose tackle through and through. Williams got a three-year, \$16.5 million deal with Tennessee. The Broncos got Peko for two years and \$7.5 million. Denver general manager John Elway no doubt feels he got more his money with Peko.

The concern is Peko is about to play his 12th NFL season at 32 years old. The Broncos believe he has two more good years left him in.

## The bad

Instead of Campbell -- who was not only the best defensive end available, but the highest-paid, non-quarterback free agent in this class with his \$15 million average salary -- the Broncos got Kerr, who was not tendered as a restricted free agent by the Indianapolis Colts.

And while Okung is a strong contender for this offseason's Most Overpaid Player distinction after he got \$13.25 million per year from the rival Los Angeles Chargers, he did leave a monstrous void at left tackle for the Broncos.

## Too Early To Tell

In four seasons, Menelik Watson has played in 27 games and made 17 starts. That's less than 8 games and just more than 4 starts a year.

The Oakland Raiders' second-round draft pick out of Florida State, Watson's most serious injury was a season-ending torn Achilles suffered in the preseason of 2015. He missed six games last season with groin and calf strains.

Still, the Broncos love his talent and size (6-foot-5, 315 pounds) as they transition to the power-blocking scheme.

Kerr is another player with potential who hasn't quite done it yet.

Edebali is a better pass rusher than Dekoda Watson but it will be difficult to match Watson's play as a special teamer.

The ultimate uncertainty, though, is Romo. It's uncertain whether the Broncos will pursue the quarterback. If do go after him and sign him, it's questionable whether the move would be considered good or bad.

The opinions of quarterbacks are stronger than they are of guards.

# To lift offense, Broncos know they must improve running game

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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Yes, it's most certainly a passing league. Yes, it's all about the quarterback.

Yes, the Denver Broncos' three Super Bowl wins have come with John Elway, John Elway and Peyton Manning at quarterback.

But in the wake of their first playoff miss since 2010, much of the Broncos' reconstruction on offense has been about what happens when the team doesn't throw the ball. Because it was their dismal running game last season that turned their offense into a stagnant affair with quarterbacks who had no way to slow down the pass-rushers chasing them.

Or as former coach Gary Kubiak put it at the Super Bowl: "That's going to be one of my biggest frustrations about all of it looking back. That we worked and worked and we never could get it the way we wanted it."

The league is decidedly a chuck-it-around affair these days -- 13 quarterbacks topped 4,000 yards passing last season -- and defenses have reacted. The NFL has made it more and more difficult to cover receivers because of contact rules, so for many defensive coordinators the only recourse has been to turn loose the pass-rushers.

On offense, line play -- either because of the turnover caused by free agency, or the erosion of NFL-style fundamentals because of the spread offenses in college -- is not always what teams need it to be. But a team that can run the ball can protect its quarterback better. It is worth noting that the teams in the Super Bowl ranked No. 5 and No. 7 in the NFL in rushing, even though the Falcons have quarterback Matt Ryan, who won the league's MVP award, and the Patriots have Tom Brady, who added to his Hall of Fame resume with another Super Bowl win.

"There's always room to run the ball in your offense, and it helps your quarterback be his best," said former Broncos running backs coach Bobby Turner, who was on the Falcons' staff last season. "In Denver we had T.D. [Terrell Davis] and John, they went together."

Well, "John" is the Broncos' top football decision-maker these days, and his new coach Vance Joseph wants the Broncos to carve out something more than ornamental yardage in the running game. It's why their checkbook opened in free agency for a guard (Ronald Leary) and a tackle (Menelik Watson).

"You watch Leary play, he played the game with an attitude, he was physical, he was trying to finish blocks," Joseph said. "It's the same with Watson. Both of those kids play with an attitude. 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. That is the attitude that you want."

It has been the theme of the Broncos' offseason. But this isn't a new thing.

The Broncos enjoyed immense prosperity on offense in Manning's four seasons -- four division titles, two Super Bowl trips and the league's first 600-point season in 2013. But even the guy who called the plays in two of those years -- current Miami Dolphins coach Adam Gase -- often expressed his frustration that they didn't have the kind of running game that could have made it all a little better.

The Broncos haven't had a 1,000-yard rusher since 2013 (Knowshon Moreno) and they haven't had a 1,200-yard rusher since Reuben Droughns in 2004. Though they definitely like their prospects at quarterback (Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch), the bottom line is the Broncos believe they won't know exactly what either of those players can be until they play in an offense that can protect them up front and run the ball.

That's why folks have heard Elway and Joseph repeatedly use words such as "mentality" and "attitude" when talking about what they want to see more of from the offense this fall. The Broncos are a team of defensive swagger that wants to see a little more of that from the guys on the other side of the ball.

"I definitely take more enjoyment blocking for the run," Leary said. "I feel like run blocking is all about attitude. It's big guy on big guy ... Once you see one guy doing it, then OK, that looks fun knocking people around. Then the next guy does it and it just trickles down. That is how you become a dominant offensive line."

The Broncos still have plenty of work to do. They still have an opening at left tackle, and they could use a running back in the mix who has some big-play pop.

But their intentions have been clear in the offseason to this point.

"I grew up fighting my whole life," Watson said. "It's nothing new to get physical. It's what I like to do. It's why I'm an offensive lineman. It's just part of the game. It's a physical game. You can't go into this thing timid. You've got to be the aggressor. That's what I like to be."

# Dekoda Watson leaves Broncos, signs with 49ers

By Troy Renck

KMGH

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Outside linebacker Dekoda Watson meshed seamlessly into the Broncos' locker room last season. He cracked up teammates with his selfies pitching products, and displayed a grinder's work ethic that solidified the special teams coverage units.

When the Broncos signed former New Orleans Saints linebacker Kasim Edebali last week, however, Watson's path back to Denver became complicated. He visited Seattle and San Francisco this week, signing a three-year, \$6-million deal with the 49ers on Friday night.

"Broncos Country you will be missed truly!" Watson tweeted, who is No. 57 pictured above prior to the Jacksonville victory. "Thank y'all so much for me taking me in. You fans are truly amazing!!"

Watson, a seven-year pro from Florida State, posted a Broncos' best 11 special teams tackles last season. He played in all 16 games, contributing six tackles and one forced fumble. Watson was praised for his practice habits, and earned additional playing time late in the season. Broncos general manager John Elway said Monday he wanted to keep Watson, but knew the veteran was testing the market.

In many ways, Edebali's addition precluded Watson's return. Edebali was a special teams ace for the Saints and plays defensive and outside linebacker. Edebali signed a one-year, \$1.2 million contract with a \$200,000 signing bonus. The Broncos also boast linebacker Vontarrius Dora, who remains an intriguing prospect after a developmental season.

The Broncos continue to exercise patience this offseason. They are looking for a starting left tackle either through the draft, trade or free agency. There's been no movement on the Tony Romo situation. The Broncos are not inclined to deal for the quarterback, but are expected to express interest if and when he becomes a free agent. The next artificial deadline that could prompt action with Romo remains the NFL owners meetings, which begin on March 26 in Phoenix. Executives will convene under the same roof, increasing the likelihood of discussions. The Broncos begin their offseason workouts in early April -- two weeks earlier -- because they hired a new coach.

# Spread offenses in college make NFL a guessing game

By Arnie Stapleton

Associated Press

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he spread offenses that dominate the NCAA produce a parade of points but also prospects that aren't quite ready for the NFL.

Quarterbacks have to learn to line up under center and scan the field while backpedaling. Running backs have to learn to scurry straight ahead. Wide receivers have to dramatically expand their route tree.

"The football being played from the high school level to the college level is a different brand of football than they're going to be asked to play," 49ers general manager John Lynch said.

Nowhere is that gulf more evident than in the trenches where the vast majority of offensive linemen are no longer the plug-and-play types like Ryan Clady or Joe Thomas were a decade ago.

Now, teams have to project how shrewdly and swiftly these big men will adjust to the pro game because most of them have never gotten into a three-point stance to blow an opponent off the ball or been asked to maintain a block for several seconds while his quarterback searches for his target.

While every team sprinkles in some college-style plays, the spread hasn't really infiltrated the NFL, where teams fear their quarterbacks would get exposed to more hits. So it's up to the O-linemen to quickly adapt to protect the passer - and the owner's chief investment.

That puts the onus on personnel evaluators to pinpoint which linemen are going to be able to make that leap.

## CHECKING THE CRYSTAL BALL

Titans coach Mike Mularkey looks for play-to-the-whistle attitude: "You can see it on tape, whether they've got that in them," Mularkey said. "I can see body language. You can see. Film doesn't lie."

It does hide, though.

"Sometimes, you go through 80 plays and only like eight of them are truly grade-able, where they're at the point of contact and they're actually doing something you're going to ask them to do," 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan said. "And what you never want to do as a coach is ask a player to do something that he's not capable of doing.

"And so if you can't see that on tape, the next most important thing to me is seeing them in personal workouts, where you can get down there, you can get a position coach to go down there, take them through some drills. And yeah, it's not football, you can't see their toughness and everything like that like you can on tape, but the physiology of how a guy moves, sometimes you have to send a guy down there to see how they move."

They look for fluid footwork and flexibility in addition to seeing how strong and smart they are.

## IT'S EDUCATED GUESSES

"There are colleges that are wide open and throw the ball 100 times, so you don't get to evaluate every technique that they're going to be taught here," Bengals personnel director Duke Tobin said. "You've got to kind of project them in. You've got to project traits. You've got to project size, strength, movement. You've got to project is he an aware player? Can he react quickly? If those are all yes, then you feel pretty confident that he can come in and run the techniques that you're going to have him run."

Projecting was more of a buzzword at the NFL scouting combine this month than ever before.

"It's easy when you can see a guy go do exactly what you're going to ask him to do and you can evaluate that, judge that. It becomes a little bit more interesting when you have to project, and that's part of our business," said Texans GM Rick Smith.

"It still boils down to you want an athletic guy, a guy that has strength and power and smarts and movement," Buccaneers GM Jason Licht said. "So, if you can see those things ... and you can. You just don't see it or identify it as quickly as you did in the past. But you can still see it. It just makes it more challenging."

## BRAIN POWER IS ALSO KEY

Rams coach Sean McVay said as important as athleticism is the academic side because of "all the different things that they have to handle with blitz protection and pickups and pass pro, being able to adjust in the run game."

So they want to see the linemen get low for leverage and then see what they have "above the neck," McVay said.

NFL Network draft analyst Mike Mayock said the college O-linemen aren't "used to the physicality of the NFL game in a three-point stance, and they're not used to how complex the pass protections are, and I think it slows them all down."

There are exceptions such as Titans tackle Jack Conklin, from Michigan State, and Lions tackle Taylor Decker, of Ohio State, who came more conventional, power run offenses.

## REDSHIRT ROOKIES

More and more raw rookies, however, are getting essentially a redshirt year like Cardinals tackle D.J. Humphries, a first-round pick in 2015 who debuted in 2016.

"I loved him coming out (of Florida)," Cardinals coach Bruce Arians said. "We knew what we were getting, a very young guy who had very little skill set and a lot of athleticism. It took him a year to get the skill set. We knew he had the heart. To take these guys and teach them how to play, to hear a play in the huddle and decipher the information, to go up and get down in a stance, to run block that way, to get off on a hard count - it's very hard for these guys."

"They struggle all spring and a lot of times, they really struggle in training camp because that's the first time they've put on pads and actually hit anybody. That's a problem with our game, we just don't get to practice enough in pads with these young kids."

#### A NEW CROP

This year's draft class is lean at tackle with the top prospects Ryan Ramczyk of Wisconsin and Utah's Garrett Bolles both having started just one year in college.

Arians, however, isn't one to criticize the college coaches for not preparing these players for the pros.

"No, their job is to win games and I'd be doing the same damn thing if I was coaching in college with the 20-hour rule," Arians said. "I'd get the best athlete I could, put him back there (at quarterback) and spread it out. It's our job now to adjust and not criticize what they're doing and really to get our fans to realize your No. 1 pick is not what it used to be. Tony Boselli ain't coming out now because he's in a different offense. There's so much more teaching involved with these younger players right now. Much greater athletes but much more teaching on our part."

#### LEARNING ON THE FLY

Sometimes teams decide it's best to let their linemen figure it out on the field.

The Seahawks had the lowest-paid offensive line in football last year, spending just over \$6 million on its inexperienced unit that featured a converted basketball player at left tackle, a rookie at right guard, a second-year player with one previous game at left guard and a center on his third position in three years.

The Seahawks took things up a notch last season by training former hoopster George Fant on the fly to play left tackle.

"It was a shock that he could compete, but he showed quite early that he was physically capable," his coach, Pete Carroll, said.

#### NOT JUST THE NFL'S CONUNDRUM

Seahawks GM John Schneider said the pool of O-linemen is thin even for college coaches because the best big men are lining up on the other side of the ball or even at tight end - two groups that are, not surprisingly, very deep in this year's draft class.

"The majority of guys aren't like, 'I'm going to be the best offensive lineman in high-school football,'" Schneider said. "They want to sack the quarterback."

Ramczyk comes from a power-run offense but even he is under no illusion about being able to step right in and dominate as he did in the Big Ten.

"Going into the NFL is a huge jump," Ramczyk said. "You're playing against the best players in the world. So I don't think it's easy for anyone to adjust."

# Most NFL teams lack a quality QB because supply doesn't meet demand

By Brian Smith  
Houston Chronicle  
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Isn't this fun?

Tony Romo, Rick Smith and the Texans sitting around, waiting on Jerry Jones to pick up the phone, or at least twiddle his thumbs.

Talk radio stuck in limbo - or hell - for weeks, depending on how high your tolerance for endless Romo mumbo jumbo reaches. National TV football shows sinking even lower, with constant "Tony and Jerry" coverage beamed in live from Houston and Dallas - despite the fact that absolutely nothing has happened and old No. 9 is stuck in that forbidden city to the north.

Twelve days after free-agency madness unofficially began and 10 days after the initial insane lottery numbers started rolling in again, the Texans haven't signed a soul and are stuck idly waiting on Romo. (Re-signing a punter, kicker and backup tight end doesn't count.)

I've written and you've seethed about the Texans' endless search for a franchise quarterback enough for right now. So let's examine a couple of larger interconnected questions while the Romo clock keeps on slowly ticking.

Why are we even talking about Romo in 2017?

And why can't the NFL find new QBs worth keeping around?

Romo, 36, leading the Texans in Bill O'Brien's make-or-break fourth season could be pure genius or an absolute disaster. Bob McNair's franchise is that desperate for a double-digit win solution (see: Brock Osweiler, \$72 million, playoff win, Cleveland), and it actually makes perfect sense that a team leading the NFL in starting QBs since 2014 (eight) would now be at a total standstill until Romo is magically released from Jones' castle.

The NFL's problem is much more troubling and complex.

To say they just don't make them like they used to would be an enormous understatement. Because they pretty much don't make them anymore.

The Texans are far from the only team in the league that can't find a lasting QB. Those that have them rarely, if ever, let them go. New England is sitting on two (ageless wonder Tom Brady; invaluable, little-seen backup Jimmy Garoppolo).

Those that lack a solution draft, sign and trade in vain, with everyone from San Francisco and Chicago to the New York Jets and Browns mirroring the Texans' frustrating path in recent seasons.

Good money chases bad

It was in vogue to freak out about Mike Glennon's ridiculous three-year, \$43.5 million payday at the height of the recent free-agent frenzy. But the Bears were coming off eight mostly pointless years under Jay "I Don't Care" Cutler and are staring at the same QB draft board we're all seeing.

A couple of intriguing names and a bunch of nobodies. Another year where ever-evolving college offenses - up tempo, spread out, wide open - fail to match up with the pro systems they are supposed to be feeding.

Yes, we can blame the Texans for their faults and misses. Sure, the NFL is ultimately Darwinism between the lines - you either have a QB who carries you or get devoured by the same names every year.

But how many true franchise quarterbacks are in the league right now? And how many of those actually could put together a Super Bowl season if Week 1 started Monday?

Brady. Matt Ryan. Aaron Rodgers. Ben Roethlisberger.

There's a clear second tier that's older than Romo (Drew Brees, 38), older than you think (like Dallas' hostage No. 9, Eli Manning is also 36) or again has something to prove in 2017 (Russell Wilson, Andrew Luck, Matthew Stafford, Andy Dalton, Joe Flacco).

A promising collection of youth (Derek Carr, Marcus Mariota, Dak Prescott, Jameis Winston, Carson Wentz) has won a combined zero playoff games.

Then an underrated game-manager Kansas City could always move on from in Alex Smith, and Philip Rivers at 35 is in Year 14. That's about it.

Oswieiler was easily one of the worst QBs in the league last year and next-to-last in passer rating (72.2). Cam Newton (75.8) was one spot ahead of the QB the Texans just shipped to Cleveland, telling you just how hard a quarterback's life has become in the pass-first NFL.

Brian Hoyer, tossed away by O'Brien a year ago and on his seventh team, could be the 49ers' starter this season. Ex-Texans castoff Ryan Mallett just received \$2 million to hopefully never play in Baltimore.

Jared Goff, the No. 1 pick in 2016, was a first-year flop in Los Angeles and initially backed up former Texan Case Keenum.

Another weak draft class

This year's QB class is even less inspiring. The Texans have to take someone. But no one - Mitchell Trubisky, Deshaun Watson, DeShone Kizer, Patrick Mahomes - is viewed as a Week 1 starter and your draft-obsessed neighbor would struggle to publicly name the second level of professional maybes (Nathan Peterman, Brad Kaaya, Jerod Evans).

No wonder one particular TV sports channel devotes so much wasted air time to useless Kirk Cousins and Romo chatter. No wonder John Elway - who was about \$8 million away from overpaying Oswieiler

last year - has Paxton Lynch and Trevor Siemian on the same roster, and he could end up with the aging QB that Jones' Cowboys refuse to let go of.

Until the NFL adapts to the new college game, the professional QB crisis will go on. And the Texans aren't the only team that can't find an answer.

# Paxton Lynch ready for Broncos' quarterback competition

By Andrew Mason  
DenverBroncos.com  
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Even over the phone, Paxton Lynch's eagerness for what 2017 will bring is palpable.

A new offense built around the strengths he and Trevor Siemian possess. An open competition between himself and Siemian, who have established a good rapport in their one season together -- one in which Lynch said Siemian helped ease his transition and show him how to be a professional.

All that has him ready to make his push for the starting job in the open competition that Head Coach Vance Joseph has planned for the two young quarterbacks.

"I'm very excited," Lynch said.

"I feel a lot more comfortable -- especially having a year under my belt, doing that five-step, seven-step stuff that I never did before until I got to Denver. I think that helped me a lot, so I'm just trying to not lose a step and keep moving forward."

To do that, Lynch didn't want to get too far away from football. In recent weeks, Lynch worked with Charlie Taaffe, a long-time college coach who also served as a head coach in the Canadian Football League and now works one-on-one with quarterbacks.

The emphasis of Lynch's work with Taaffe? His feet.

"Once I finished up [the 2016 season], I called him fairly quickly to try to set something up whenever I was going to be back here in Florida," Lynch said. "He's been working with me on my footwork. He hasn't been messing with my throwing mechanics, but I've been meeting up with him a couple of times per week, and he's been fine-tuning some stuff."

Although Lynch has spent most of his offseason in Florida, he said he stayed in touch with coaches, particularly Joseph, Offensive Coordinator Mike McCoy and Quarterbacks Coach Bill Musgrave -- although, per league regulations, they can't have football discussions at this point in the year.

"I've actually talked to them multiple times -- once the coaching change happened and they all got settled in, I got to talk to all of them on the phone, and when I was back in Denver I got a chance to sit down and talk to them -- mostly talking to Coach McCoy," Lynch said.

"I've been in contact with them, and Coach Musgrave has called me a couple of times to check in and see how I was doing and make sure I was relaxing a little bit. They've been really good."

And after Lynch learned about the signings of Ron Leary and Menelik Watson, Lynch contacted team vice president of public relations Patrick Smyth to get his new teammates' phone numbers so he could reach out to them as soon as possible and welcome them to the fold.

"From the conversations that I've had with Ron and Menelik, they were both really excited to be a part of the organization," Lynch said.

In a few weeks, Lynch will get to work with his new and old teammates every day when team-organized workouts begin at the UCHHealth Training Center -- and begin meeting with coaches to learn McCoy's scheme. That should include elements in which Lynch flourished at Memphis and showed flashes during practices and the three games in which he played last year -- particularly up-tempo work and snaps out of the shotgun.

"I'm nothing but excited to get to work," Lynch said. "If we go up-tempo and do all that stuff, I'll feel right at home doing it, and if we've got to go in another direction, and take some more drops under center, I'll be ready for that, too."

And Lynch knows that his chances of earning the starting job rely on not only being ready, but following through with attention to detail, diligence and execution.

"Paxton's a young guy with great talent, but playing quarterback in the NFL is a lot more than talent," Joseph said last Monday. "It's leadership -- whether you like it or not, it comes with leadership obligations. It comes with studying and understanding the systems.

"He's ready for it. He wants the challenge. He's looking forward to getting back in and going to work."