

Broncos like their QBs, but also like the idea of drafting one

By Jeff Legwold
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This will be the seventh draft John Elway has overseen as the Denver Broncos' chief football decision-maker.

At the moment, the Broncos have 10 picks, and if they use them all it would comprise the largest draft class of Elway's tenure. The Broncos also have an open spot on the depth chart for a quarterback, so there is some math to be done there.

Though coach Vance Joseph has discussed adding a veteran presence to work alongside Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, history suggests Elway will be looking in the draft. The rub is that the Broncos want Siemian and Lynch to battle it out in training camp for the starting job, and Joseph has repeatedly said they are "1 and 2 -- one of them will start and the other one will be the 2."

That means a third quarterback, who will be needed for minicamps and training camp, is either a developmental prospect with a spot on the practice squad his most likely future, or a veteran who fully understands the Broncos' plan to have Siemian and Lynch battle it out to start.

Joseph has entertained the philosophical scenario in which a veteran quarterback comes in and has the potential to win the job.

"Right now, today, we've got two quarterbacks in our building that are going to be 1 and 2," Joseph said this past week. "We have to add a third in some capacity. Now, could that third outplay our 1 and 2? if he's that good, absolutely. But right now, we have a 1 and 2 in our building."

Opinions vary widely around the league about the quarterbacks at the top of the draft board, including Patrick Mahomes II, Deshaun Watson and Mitch Trubisky. But down the board, Elway has consistently shown he's thinking quarterback in almost every draft class, no matter how stocked he feels the team might be at the position, so if the board falls right another one could be on the way.

Elway has selected a quarterback in four of the past six drafts. Three of those quarterbacks -- Siemian, Lynch and Brock Osweiler -- have each started at least one game for the team.

In 2013, Elway used a seventh-round pick on Zac Dysert with Peyton Manning and Osweiler on the roster. And in 2015 Elway used a seventh-round pick on Siemian, again with Manning and Osweiler on the roster.

Joseph said this past week that it "makes no sense" to bring an older, veteran quarterback in to be the team's No. 3.

"We've got two guys, and it's going to be a competition," Joseph said. "That's going to make both guys better. Whoever wins the job is going to play for us, but that guy behind him is going to get better

through the competition. We've got those two young guys that we're happy with. One is going to start and one is going to be that second guy."

But down the board, big-framed passers like Penn's Alek Torgersen, Virginia Tech's Jerod Evans and Central Michigan's Cooper Rush are the kind of QBs to keep an eye on, because Elway has made no secret he prefers the big-stature guys behind center.

Joseph and Elway have consistently said they like -- really like -- the two quarterbacks they have, but they will still give plenty of thought to using a draft pick on another one.

Paul DePodesta: The Brain Behind the Browns Rebuild

By Peter King

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Paul DePodesta, the Cleveland Browns' trump card on the rest of the NFL. Nice fellow. Harvard guy, and, to his credit, doesn't intimidate you with his Ivy League brain. Fifteen months into the new job after two decades with five Major League Baseball teams. Nowhere to go but up. The Browns are in a three-year run with the most high draft picks of any team in football every year: nine in the first four rounds last year, nine in the first five rounds this year, seven in the first four rounds next year. DePodesta, Cleveland's chief strategy officer, is the mover and the shaker and the Moneyballer in this show. Right?

I spent 40 minutes with DePodesta at the league meetings the other day. I don't doubt his import to the organization and to the cause of rescuing the Browns from a life of awfulness.

But I still have no idea what he does.

"I think part of that maybe is intentional," said DePodesta, 44, in shorts and a T-shirt, sitting on a folding chair in a garden at the classic old Arizona Biltmore Hotel. "I'm trying to think of the most succinct way to put it. I really focus on process as much as anything else: process for how we evaluate players, process for how we make decisions, process even for how we hire people internally, process for how we go about integrating our scouting reports with guys watching tape in the office. It is really about how we do the things we do. I think part of the reason they brought me in is because I am completely naive about the National Football League. I have no preconceived notions about how things ought to be done or how they have been done in the past, and I can look at it with a fresh set of eyes."

"Is there an example you can give me?" I asked.

"I don't know," DePodesta said. "We are trying to develop things that ultimately will give us a competitive advantage and will get us back onto the landscape in terms of those competitive teams that are playing in January every year. So, I am hesitant to give away too much of what we're trying to do. The other reason I think it's hard is because it is really collective. We have a lot of people in our office who are very bright and have been around the game for a lot longer than I have, who had a lot of these ideas before I ever showed up."

So I can't draw the specifics out of DePodesta—which, though I wouldn't tell him, I actually like, because the last thing you want on your team is some baseball know-it-all coming in to tell the football guys how to win, and the second-to-last thing is then bragging about what you're doing.

Let's try something else, then. The one thing that's obvious about the Cleveland approach—and it has to be a big part of the DePodesta way, seeing that he's the strategy guy—is the accumulation of draft choices. When he starts talking about that, clues start surfacing.

“We’ve looked ourselves in the mirror and said, ‘Do we think that we are actually superhuman when it comes to picking players?’ And we pretty easily answered that with a resounding no. So how are we going to increase our chances? We need to have more picks. So, if we have the same number of picks every year as everyone else, we don’t expect do better than anyone else.”

“Sounds like Jimmy Johnson’s philosophy,” I said. “You aware of that?”

“Yes,” he said, smiling.

“Had any conversations with him?” I said.

“I’ll keep that to myself. I’ll say this: I’m a big admirer of what he’s done.”

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Jimmy Johnson coached the Cowboys from 1989 to 1993. He had a heavy influence on the draft under owner Jerry Jones. By the time Johnson figured out how vital volume of picks was, the Cowboys began to own the draft. See how familiar this looks:

- Dallas, 1991-1993 — Top four rounds of the draft: NFL-high 23 picks.
- Cleveland, 2016-2018 (as of today) — Top four rounds of the draft: NFL-high 22 picks.

Yes, Johnson has spoken with the Browns. He just won’t say about what.

But it’s no deep, dark mystery. Just as acquiring all these picks wasn’t deep and dark. The Browns in 2016 traded the second pick in the draft down to Philadelphia’s eighth slot in the round, and then again to Tennessee at 15. That netted Cleveland seven picks over multiple drafts in the first four rounds.

“That’s good,” Johnson said from Florida on Friday. “There’s strength in numbers. I always wanted to have more picks in the middle rounds and at the end, because you can build a good team with the role players you get in the third, fourth and fifth rounds. With the Browns now, with all those picks, really, you’re one free-agent class and one draft from being a contender.

“But I’ll tell you, here’s the danger of having so many picks: You think, ‘We’ve got so many picks, let’s move up and take that guy with a little risk.’ You think you’ve got so many picks and you can afford to waste them on guys. I never looked at it that way. You have to look at every pick like it’s the only one you’ve got. Like I’ve told Bill Belichick, ‘You don’t have to use ’em this year. Bank ’em. Trade ’em.’ He knows. One time he told me he had a good team, and he had some extra picks, and he was afraid the guy they’d take might not be good enough to make his team. Fine. You don’t like what’s there? You can always find someone to take your four this year for a three next year. Like I said, bank ’em.”

What Johnson and the Cowboys were so good at was hitting on some of the late ones—and that’s due to the fact that they could afford to err because of the multiple picks. The Cowboys hit on Troy Aikman and Emmitt Smith with first-round picks in 1989 and 1990, back when the draft was 12 rounds long, and in 1991 got Leon Lett in the seventh round and cornerback Larry Brown, a future Super Bowl MVP, in the

12th. “In college I was my own recruiting coordinator at Oklahoma State,” Johnson said. “That helped me later on, because Oklahoma was the top program in the state, and so I didn’t just get the best guys; I had to look for some of the hidden guys. So when you’ve got all these picks, and a lot of them come down the line, you’d better know players.”

There’s the pressure on Cleveland. With 31 competitive front offices, the Browns had better have a cadre of scouts DePodesta and GM Sashi Brown and VP of player personnel Andrew Berry can trust. Said DePodesta: “We don’t get any points or win any games for having the most picks. We need to turn that into talent. It’s part of the reason we are so excited for this April. I think our team will look fundamentally different in May than it does right now.”

It very likely will. But this Browns administration cannot afford to have a B-minus draft. “Cleveland doesn’t have to build their team all this year,” said Johnson. “But after three years, they better have a contender. If they’re not a contender after three years, someone ought to be fired. Simple as that.”

* * *

The one thing that bugs me about Cleveland is the loss of too many players they’ve developed. Center Alex Mack and wideout Taylor Gabriel left in 2016 and were keys on Atlanta’s NFC title team. A good right tackle, Mitchell Schwartz, left in free agency a year ago in his prime, at 26, for Kansas City. This year the Browns lost a potential star wide receiver, Terrelle Pryor, after transitioning him from quarterback; they couldn’t bridge a contract dispute, and he signed in Washington.

That’s four holes Cleveland didn’t need to have. At some point—like, now—the Browns won’t be able to justify losing good players on the road to contending. I asked DePodesta why they’ve lost key players whom they probably should have kept.

“Great question,” he said. “I’d say going back a year when we did have a handful of free agents and we allowed them all to sign elsewhere, that was a moment in time. That is not something that we want to do continuously. Again, that was a situation that we felt like we really do need to rebuild the foundation of this organization, and it is almost like redoing a house—you need to rip down all the walls and get it down to the studs. Now, when you do that and you tear out all the walls and the floors and all you have left are the studs, you look at it and go, wow this looks terrible. We never want to go through this again, and I think that is our attitude.

“Even as we got into the season last year, there was a monumental shift in our organizational evolution, and it was when we traded for [New England linebacker] Jamie Collins. What we were trying to show everyone in our organization hopefully, and all our fans, was that that is now behind us and we are adding to this and building; this is not going to be about tearing it down all the time. This offseason we were able to re-sign Jamie, we were able to re-sign [guard] Joel Bitonio, and we added free agents this year. We feel like we’ve got a handful of players that will be part of our core going forward, and our goal is to now build out that core and ultimately, when it comes time, retain it. It did come time right now, with guys like Bitonio and Jamie, we had to retain them and we did. And we will have more players that will be like that.”

* * *

“What translates between baseball and football?” I wondered.

“I’ve actually been struck by how many similarities there are,” DePodesta said. “I have been through similar rebuilding exercises, but I think baseball is different especially because of that minor-league system, where you can see the wave building through the minor leagues. Whether baseball or football, we’re tasked in front offices with making decisions under uncertainty. How do you corral that uncertainty in a way to make more consistently better decisions? That’s very similar. I remember last year, during the free agency period, sitting in a room with a bunch of our scouts, and we were talking about these players, and I remember thinking, ‘I don’t have a 20-year library of players in my head like I did in baseball, so there’s not a whole lot I can contribute to the nuance of this conversation.’ But these are the exact same conversations I have been having for the last 20 years. You try to build a winning culture and bring a group of people together in a short period of time and work them toward a common goal. The competitiveness on a week-to-week basis is the same. The impact of things like injuries is the same. But I still had more to learn about baseball, so that gives you an idea of how far down the learning curve I am with football.”

There’s one simple thing about football, though: The quarterback’s more important than any player on a baseball team. Alex Smith isn’t as good at football as Clayton Kershaw is at baseball, but Smith’s more important to the success of the Chiefs than Kershaw is to the Dodgers.

You don’t win without a good quarterback, and the Browns don’t have a good one, and this year is a tough year for quarterbacks because there’s no sure thing. It’s the continued black cloud over this franchise. Here they are, owning the draft, with the first, 12th and 33rd overall picks, and there’s no Andrew Luck coming in, and probably not anyone close. I believe the similarly needy 49ers may well wait until the 2018 off-season, in either free agency or the draft, to sell souls for a quarterback. It may not be a bad idea for the Browns to do the same, seeing that 2018 is likely to have a better crop of passers—and it could include vets Jimmy Garoppolo and maybe Kirk Cousins.

But in that QB-in-2018 scenario, the Browns would go two straight off-seasons of this new regime without acquiring the quarterback of the future. In the Jimmy Johnson motif, year three would then be a pressure cooker of all pressure cookers.

So there’s nothing easy, and nothing altogether familiar, about this job for DePodesta. Not like his baseball life. By the way, the five teams DePodesta worked for in baseball—Cleveland, Oakland, the Dodgers, San Diego and the Mets—open their baseball seasons today. So I wondered if after the 1-15 Browns season DePodesta has the slightest pang of regret about leaving baseball. “No,” he said. “I absolutely loved my time in baseball, but I am really, really enjoying this challenge.”

He told a story about when the Indians reached the World Series in 1997, when the Browns were two years from being reborn. He said downtown was celebratory after the team won the pennant. “I

remember someone saying, ‘This is wild, but you have no idea what this would be had it been the Browns.’ And that always stuck with me.”

If DePodesta ever rides in a Browns championship parade, it won’t be Jonah Hill who plays him in the next movie. There might be a line to play him, led by Leonardo DiCaprio and Bradley Cooper.

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More Nuggets From the League Meetings

A collection of things I heard and saw and felt at the league meetings.

On the changing face of the NFL

This might just be me, but I don’t think so. One afternoon at the pool at the Arizona Biltmore, the newest, and youngest, head coaches in the league were hanging around like pups with guys we hadn’t thought of as old vets. By the pool on a roasting afternoon, Rams coach Sean McVay (age 31) and San Francisco’s Kyle Shanahan (37) were asking counsel of Steelers coach Mike Tomlin (45) and the Saints’ Sean Payton (53). McVay got introduced to Tomlin a couple of years ago by a Tomlin protégé, Atlanta assistant Raheem Morris, and they’ve spent time at the combine getting to know each other. It’s more McVay picking Tomlin’s brain, but Tomlin gets something out of it too—keeping up with some of the new coaches and some of the new trends in football.

“One of the things I’ve learned to appreciate about Mike Tomlin is you always feel his presence in a room,” McVay said. “He seems like he never has a bad day, and that’s something we want to mimic and emulate. Mike’s been great with how to deal with the team, how to handle adversity, and staying true to your core beliefs. I can’t tell you how much respect I have for him, and I’ll continue to try to bother him for advice.”

Mike Tomlin as elder statesman ... that’s different. And Payton has become an advice-dispenser too.

On the Super Bowl rematch

Nothing has changed from my post-Super Bowl opinion that Atlanta at New England is probably not going to be the NFL’s opening game on Sept. 7. One thing I learned in Phoenix that will have a huge bearing on the Patriots’ guest in Week 1: the factor of the new stadium in Atlanta.

The Falcons believe they will play on the road (but not in New England) in Week 1, then open their new stadium on Sunday night of Week 2 against an undisclosed opponent. The NFL will announce the 2017 schedule in mid- to late April.

So if Atlanta opens at home on national TV in an NBC game in Week 2, the Falcons almost certainly will not play on NBC to open the season in Week 1. Which leaves open the best possibility I listed seven weeks ago in this column: Kansas City at New England. Could be Houston, could be Carolina. But my

money's on Kansas City. The fact that the Chiefs have an excellent defense and a competitive offense, and the fact that they're likely to play the Patriots tough (K.C.'s had one double-digit loss in its past 31 games) gives Andy Reid's team the best chance to play at Foxboro in game one of 256 in 2017. This way, the league can save Atlanta-New England for a big Sunday night game on NBC later in the season, or for a key FOX doubleheader game.

On the Raiders and London

The Raiders will play in 2017 in Oakland, and they'll likely play there again in 2018, while their new stadium is being built in Las Vegas. As for 2019, it's totally up in the air. My suggestion: Why not have the Raiders play four home games in London in 2019—say, two in September, two in November? Play them back to back, say in Week 3 and 4 and then in Week 10 and 11 ... and the disadvantage the Raiders will have in taking two long trips to London will be made up at least in part by the fact that they'll build local support by being a "home" team and by the fact that wherever they play that year (unless it's a slightly larger Sam Boyd Stadium in Vegas, the UNLV home field) will be awkward.

"I love the idea," said one owner who is very bullish on the NFL putting one of its 32 franchises permanently in London. "I doubt the Raiders will. But that's not the first time I've heard that." Hmmmm. Interesting.

One other reason the league might be interested in four games in London by one team? Assuming the NFL keeps the current format of four games by other teams on the 2019 calendar, it would be a chance to test the fervor of fans for eight games, perhaps by first offering season tickets to the eight games. The league is selling four-game season-ticket packages this year, and already 40,000 season seats have been purchased. So far, the league has sold out 16 of 17 regular-season games in London, with one game in 2011 falling 7,000 tickets short because they went on sale late due to the threat of a lockout that season.

On the Raiders' move

To put it mildly, the reaction to the Raiders' move from Oakland to Las Vegas at the meetings was muted. The Las Vegas backers were fired up, of course. But even though the owners voted 31-1 in favor of the move, it wasn't an enthusiastic vote of confidence that they love Las Vegas; it was more resignation that the Raiders would never get a good stadium built in Oakland unless owner Mark Davis agreed to take on a partner. Which, unfortunately for Oakland, he refused to do. I've written this several times, but Davis probably could have found a 50-percent partner who would have been a keystone to building a stadium in northern California, the same way the Mara family merged with the Tischs in 1991 when the cost of doing NFL business became too high for one family without significant income elsewhere. Easy for me to say that Davis should have sold half his team; I understand it's his call. His father, the late Al Davis, steadfastly refused to cede any control of the franchise to partners. Ditto Mark Davis.

Look at a map of the Bay Area. Look at San Jose, on the southern end. Right next to San Jose is Santa Clara, where the 49ers play. Up in Oakland, 42 miles north of San Jose, is where the Raiders will be

leaving. To get from San Francisco, Oakland and Berkeley to see the 49ers is a solid hour in the car. And I can tell you that what concerns the league now is the fact that the northern part of the Bay Area, the sixth-largest market in the country, is now going to be without an NFL team. With so much money, and so much fan interest, having one team and having it at the southern end of the region, with nothing at the northern end, is disconcerting.

The fans in this region already are turned off by the 49ers, and it will take a rally orchestrated by GM John Lynch and coach Kyle Shanahan to get them excited again. The Raiders were being built into a power, the kind of team fans from all over the Bay Area could have learned to love. Now, the Raiders may not even be loved in the next two years inside the Oakland Coliseum. Maybe a fabulously wealthy Silicon Valley entrepreneur will spearhead a drive to pick off a struggling NFL team and move it west in the next three or four years, and lead the building of a new stadium. If not, the NFL will miss the greatness of this region at a time when it's continuing to explode (in a good way) economically.

Somehow the NFL has to figure a way to stop the bleeding in great football regions like San Diego and San Francisco/Oakland. It's not going to be easy. But there are too many great fans of pro football in California getting slapped in the face with the moves of these two franchises. That's one of the reasons no NFL owner or executive was celebrating the move of Oakland to Las Vegas ... and the Chargers in Los Angeles as a second team makes absolutely zero sense either. The Chargers in L.A. and the Raiders in Vegas are good for the NFL's business. But there's nothing else good about either move.

On the longevity of football players

Interesting response when Saints coach Sean Payton was asked about players—such as Tom Brady and Drew Brees—playing so much longer than those players of past eras. “There’s an old picture I’ve seen, and Archie Manning has it,” Payton said. “It’s Len Dawson at halftime, and he’s smoking a cigarette. I think in the last five years really, we have seen it happen with golf and we’ve seen it happen with various athletes. How we look at training, sleep and nutrition is entirely different than not too long ago. When I played in college, and I like to think that that was a short time ago and I know it was not, but we did not drink water during workouts. It was frowned upon. There were certain things that were just madness. As we have learned and evolved and if you take these elite athletes that are driven with the same mindset, it is interesting how they have pushed that bar.”

On Adrian Peterson

Just what does it mean that Adrian Peterson is visiting New England? I doubt that it's very much, but you never know. Unless Peterson is willing to take very little guaranteed money, I wouldn't expect he'd sign with the Patriots. Adam Schefter reported Sunday that Peterson will spend the day in Foxboro. Bill Belichick is not a sentimental guy who signs 32-year-olds who have had one great season in the past three years, particularly at a position the Patriots use as a train station. Dion Lewis, James White and ex-Bengal Rex Burkhead will account for \$5.4 million of the Patriots' cap in 2017, according to Spotrac, which means two things: They could afford to spend more at the position without crippling their budget ... and Bill Belichick never spends big on backs, particularly backs like Peterson who would be dead weight on New England's special teams. Peterson likely wouldn't play them.

For now, I'll believe this is a fact-finding mission for a veteran who would certainly help the Patriots. But only if he takes very low pay. A good example is defensive end Chris Long, who could have probably tripled his \$2.375 million salary in 2016 had he signed with one of the other teams that pursued him a year ago. But he signed with the Patriots, earned his Super Bowl ring, and then left for the Eagles. I know Peterson says he'll play for not very much and winning is the most important thing for him. But it's hard for me to believe he'll sign with the Patriots for, say, \$4 million in total 2017 income.

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Quotes of the Week

I

"Now they're part of a normal college experience, you know? And I reminded them that this is not normal. This does not happen in real life, and what you're experiencing right now, this is real life."

—UConn coach Geno Auriemma, to ESPN, after Mississippi State beat the Huskies on a buzzer-beating shot in overtime 66-64 to end UConn's 111-game winning streak.

Excellent perspective. If you're Mississippi State, it's the game of a lifetime. If you're UConn, it's the reality of sport. If you're a women's college basketball fan, it's a great thing for the game. Goliath can lose—and Goliath can lose to a team in a game that was not a fluke. Mississippi State was better, and fought a great team gallantly for 45 minutes. Terrific ballgame.

II

"There was zero distraction. He met with the team immediately after [his first protest]. He met with the other team leaders. He explained his position and where he was coming from. And literally, that was it. Colin was focused on football."

—Chip Kelly, who was Colin Kaepernick's coach with the 49ers last year, on the fear that Kaepernick's outside interests in social justice would cause disruption on a football team, to Michael Rosenberg in a nuanced and smart column for The MMQB.

III

"I've always loved Pierre Garçon because of how angry he plays."

—New 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan, on his new wideout (who he also coached in Washington).

IV

"Some of the guys who are going to be worrying about Vegas won't be going to Vegas."

—Raiders coach Jack Del Rio, on this week's "The MMQB Podcast With Peter King," meaning that by the time the Raiders play in Las Vegas, in 2019 or 2020, the majority of the roster will have turned over from the current team.

V

"I'm not sure avocado ice cream is right for me, but if I could look like him and perform half as well, I guess I'd do it."

—New England owner Robert Kraft, at the NFL owners meetings last week, discussing one diet staple of soon-to-be-40-year-old quarterback Tom Brady.

VI

"Zero pushback. Zero ... One thing we're really good at as a league is adjusting to change. But one thing we're not very good at as a league is being receptive to change."

—NFL Competition Committee chairman Rich McKay, when I asked him if there'd been any pushback at the league meetings in Phoenix to the PAT line being moved back from the two- to the 15-yard line two years ago.

McKay's answer is perfect. At the time, moving the PAT was decried by many as creeping over-rulesmaking, fixing a play that wasn't broken. But it was broken; it was a non-competitive play. Now it's an interesting play. Instead of kickers making slightly more than 99 of 100 PATs, which was the prevailing percentage, kickers over the past two seasons have converted about 93 percent of them.

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Stat of the Week

The age of the Seattle defense got me thinking the Seahawks better win now. Like, right now.

Looking at the 12 most significant players on the defense (and part of this is a projection on my part, because jobs will be won and lost between now and opening day), 10 will be between 27 and 31 years old on Sept. 1. So as much as GM John Schneider would like to get (at least) one more offensive lineman in this draft, I think he'd better concentrate on replenishing the defense as well. The ages of Seattle's prime defenders at the start of the 2017 season:

31: Michael Bennett, Ahtyba Rubin, Cliff Avril

29: Richard Sherman, Kam Chancellor, DeShawn Sheard

28: Earl Thomas, K.J. Wright

27: Bobby Wagner, Jeremy Lane

24: Frank Clark, Jarran Reed

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Ten Things I Think I Think

1. I think we're on a pretty amazing run in sports over the past calendar year:

April 4, 2016: Kris Jenkins hits a three-point shot at the end of regulation to give Villanova a 77-74 win over North Carolina in the NCAA men's basketball national championship game.

April 26: Kobe Bryant, in the last game of his career, scores 60 points, and the Lakers beat Utah 101-96.

June 19: On the road, rebounding from a 3-1 series deficit, the Cleveland Cavaliers stun Golden State with a late three-pointer from Kyrie Irving to win the NBA title, 93-89. It's the first major pro sports title for a Cleveland team in 52 years.

Nov. 2: On the road, rebounding from a 3-1 series deficit, the Chicago Cubs stun Cleveland 8-7 to win the World Series. It's the first World Series title for the Cubs in 108 years.

Nov. 12: In college football, the 112-game regular-season winning streak of the Mount Union Purple Raiders ends when the John Carroll Blue Streaks throw a touchdown pass with 39 seconds left in a 31-28 victory. Mount Union had been 222-1 since 1994.

Jan. 9, 2017: Deshaun Watson throws a two-yard touchdown pass to Hunter Renfrow with one second left in the college football national championship game, and Clemson stuns Alabama 35-31.

Feb. 5: Down 28-3 with 20 minutes left in regulation, the New England Patriots rally to beat Atlanta 34-28 in Super Bowl 51.

March 31: Morgan William hits a 14-foot running shot at the buzzer in overtime, and Mississippi State ends UConn's 111-game winning streak in the NCAA women's basketball semifinals, 66-64. It's the first loss for UConn in 866 days.

2. I think the best fit for Colin Kaepernick is Jacksonville. And I don't want to hear anything about how bringing in Kaepernick is going to be a knock to the confidence of Blake Bortles. This is a performance business, and Bortles held back a team with his poor play last year. The Jaguars can't risk 2017 being a rerun, not with the money and draft capital they've spent to build a good defense.

3. I think this vegan stuff with Kaepernick is the stupidest kind of nonsense. I'm sure I'm the 492nd to say this in the past few days, but Tom Brady is a near-vegan.

4. I think, with Cam Newton beginning rehab of his surgically repaired right shoulder today in Charlotte, it's going to be very interesting to see if he's ready to throw the ball as normal come training camp. Newton injured the rotator cuff in his throwing shoulder Dec. 11 against San Diego, and the Panthers, hopeful that it would heal on its own, waited 109 days before choosing to have surgery last Thursday. Training camp opens in 16 weeks. Newton wasn't the same quarterback in 2016 as he was in 2015; completion percentage fell from 60 to 53 percent, and TD-to-pick differential declined from plus-25 to

plus-5. If Newton can't participate in a camp that's vital to him and the offense after last year's struggles, the Panthers erred in waiting so long to have the surgery done.

5. I think the interesting piece by Mike Florio on Saturday—that the owners held a secret meeting at the NFL meetings, and, according to Florio, Jerry Jones asked for a more liberal policy for marijuana and for more oversight on Roger Goodell's salary—makes an awful lot of sense to me. Penalizing marijuana use the same as harder drugs is ridiculous in this day and age, and Goodell's salary and benefits being more than \$30 million annually has always seemed excessive to me.

6. I think you can play these games all day, but the way I'd look at the Dion Jordan disaster for Miami is this: Before the 2013 draft, Miami held the 12th and 42nd overall picks in the first two rounds. GM Jeff Ireland traded 12 and 42 to move up to three. With the third overall pick, the Dolphins selected pass-rusher Dion Jordan of Oregon. On Friday, Miami released Jordan, who played 26 NFL games in the four Miami seasons since the draft, and had as many substance suspensions (three) as career sacks. This was a flop of colossal proportions, one of the biggest busts of this century. Here's what has to hurt worse: Miami didn't use one high pick on Jordan; it used two. And in slots 12 and 42, the Dolphins could have selected defensive tackle Kawann Short or cornerback Xavier Rhodes with the first pick, and Le'Veon Bell with the second one. That is the kind of decision that can set a franchise back years.

7. I think the signing of free-agent defensive end Chris Long in Philadelphia—for a long-term deal that seems destined for him to play at least two years with the Eagles—had a couple of interesting messages. One: Long saw his role and playing time slashed late in his Super Bowl season in New England; he played 62 of 188 snaps in New England's three postseason games. Playing a third of the snaps in the biggest games of the year must have stung. Clearly the Eagles have more planned for Long, using a scheme that he believes will fit him well. Two: Long, by his own words in Philly on Friday, wanted to emphasize how strongly he felt about his future at 32. He said last year in New England, "I didn't miss a practice, I didn't miss a game, and that was something that I was very proud of." He seemed like a guy happy to have a chance to finally get a Super Bowl ring after never making the playoffs in eight seasons with the Rams. But he also seemed like a guy saying, I can do more than I did in the postseason in New England, and I'll show you now.

8. I think my reaction to the NFL holding the 2017 NFL draft outdoors in Philadelphia is this: Waiiiiiit. Outdoors? You know what April 27 MIGHT be like at night in Philly? The NFL's got to be thinking, after a lucky temperate Super Bowl in the Meadowlands, that it can control the weather in the northeast. I am a veteran of March and April baseball and softball in New Jersey and New York, and I can tell you: April 27 always has a chance to be like Feb. 27 in this part of the world.

9. I think as I sat at the Biltmore bar one night at the league meetings, and a few feet away stood former Eagles tackle and current NFL exec Jon Runyan, who towered over his bar-mates, I had this thought: Jon Runyan is Paul Bunyan.

10. I think these are my non-football thoughts of the week:

a. South Carolina is a really tough basketball team. Gonzaga's tougher.

b. Box out, Oregon. Box out.

c. I'll take Gonzaga tonight, but that is the least-trustworthy prediction of the title game in America. I have not watched a complete college basketball game all season.

d. Loved this story about the monumental Mississippi State win over UConn—and SI.com's Richard Deitsch wrote it on deadline.

e. Story of the Week: by Gregg Doyel of the Indianapolis Star, about the compassion and kindness of fired Indiana coach Tom Crean.

f. Netflix Show of the Week: Cannot believe I hadn't discovered this before the other night, but "Chef's Table," is one of the great series on TV. You've got to watch the episode of L.A. chef Nancy Silverton (of Mozza), mostly for the cooking, but also for the incredible HD video of Silverton's Italy. If you've got a good TV, the Italy images are breathtaking. Good stuff about her quest for perfection in pizza dough too.

g. In honor of the opening of the baseball season:

h. I love box scores.

i. I love the Cactus League. It is a phenomenal thing, to see two or three games in searing heat, after spending week after week in the sleeting cold. The Cubs stadium in Mesa, the Rockies/D-Backs place on a Native American reservation ... those places are perfect. Just perfect.

j. My MLB playoff picks: (American League) New York, Cleveland, Texas. Wild Cards: Boston, Houston. (National League) Washington, Chicago, Colorado. Wild Cards: Los Angeles, San Francisco.

k. World Series: Houston over Chicago, 4-1.

l. MVP: Rougned Odor, Texas (AL), Kyle Schwarber, Chicago (NL).

m. Cy Young: Masahiro Tanaka, Yankees (AL), Kyle Hendricks, Chicago (NL).

n. Coffeenerdness: You dropped the smoked butterscotch latte, Starbucks? Give me one good reason. (I am begging.)

o. Beernerdness: Controversial choice this week. I've been a fan of the vague, mild fruit tinge to a wheat beer. But this one, Orange Blossom Mandarin Wheat Beer (Papago Brewing, Scottsdale, Ariz.) has a more pronounced orange taste—and it's fantastic. Maybe that's because I had it on a broiling day watching Rangers-Rockies at Salt River Fields at Talking Stick. (Come now: What kind of name is that for a spring training park?) But it's been a while since I had such a refreshing, distinctive beer.

p. I know I tell you to watch Steve Hartman of CBS a lot, but this piece is an excellent reason why.

* * *

The Adieu Haiku

Morgan William might
be more famous in Starkville
than one Dak Prescott.

LSU's Jamal Adams has nothing to run from ahead of NFL draft

By Lorenzo Reyes
USA Today
April 3, 2017

Jamal Adams saw the tweet scroll across his timeline.

It was posted from the official account of the league he's set to join: @NFL.

"The NFL's highest paid safety... @Stuntman1429!" it said.

That would be Eric Berry of the Kansas City Chiefs. Below the text was a graphic that showed the yearly average salary of the contract Berry had just signed – "\$13.0M" – as well as the next closest players: Tyrann Mathieu of the Arizona Cardinals, Harrison Smith of the Minnesota Vikings and so on.

Adams, the LSU standout who's competing to be the first safety off the board in this year's NFL draft, felt the need to show appreciation.

He pushed the compose button on his phone and fired off a tweet quoting the one from @NFL. He simply said "Thank you all !!"

"I owe it to those guys," Adams told USA TODAY Sports recently in a phone call. "The safeties that are being recognized are the versatile safeties: the Tyrann Mathieus, the Eric Berrys. Those guys are being paid so high because they can do it all. I think that's what separates me from the safeties in this draft.

"Malik Hooker is a great ball player, man. I don't take anything away from him. But I'm more versatile. I can do everything and that's the point that people are starting to figure out watching film."

If Adams has his wish, not only will he be drafted ahead of Hooker, the Ohio State standout, but he'll accomplish much more.

"That tweet was just basically telling the world that they're finally starting to realize that safeties are so valuable in the game," Adams continued. "I just pride myself on that, man. It's not about the money to me. I could have a dollar to play in the league. I don't care for that right now. I just love this game. I want to be a Hall of Famer. That's what I pride myself on. I want to be one of the best to ever do it."

Before all that, Adams needs to check off the next box. That comes Wednesday at LSU's pro day in Baton Rouge, La., in which he will go through many of the drills he has already done, even though he doesn't necessarily have to.

Adams ran the 40-yard dash at the NFL scouting combine in a respectable 4.56 seconds. But it put him in a three-way tie for ninth out of 15 safeties who ran, and that's what kills Adams.

"It's about finishing," Adams said. "I feel like my 40 could be a lot better."

At 6-foot and 214 pounds, however, Adams' time helped further secure his status as a likely top-five prospect.

"I told him off," LSU defensive backs coach Corey Raymond told USA TODAY Sports in a phone call. "You don't need to run. You good. They know you can run.' But I know the competitiveness in him, it eats at him. He wants to show everybody what he can do."

Adams' competitiveness is evident in his play, as he anticipates plays and punishes with knock-you-off-your-cleats hits. He also blitzes from the slot, covers deep down the field and handles a nickel corner role when assigned.

"I wanted him to be able to learn how to play in the slot because that made him more valuable," Raymond said. "It was almost like having four corners out there. But one of them was real physical."

In his career, Adams intercepted five passes for the Tigers and broke up 15. He also collected 209 tackles, 17.5 of which went for a loss.

Despite the accolades, the permanent team captain status and the first-team All-SEC and second-team All-American honors in 2016, Adams hears the criticisms about what his value might be in the NFL. Sure, he's versatile, faultfinders say, but is he truly great at any specific skill?

Adams shrugs it off.

"How is it a bad thing that I'm good at so many things?" he said. "I hate to say this because I don't like to compare myself to him, but this is how I envision it – I'm like a Troy Polamalu, man. Let him play ball, let him do what he do, and let him react off of instincts. That's my thing. There aren't too many players who can play off of instinct, and I've got that locked down."

Adams has scheduled visits with the Pittsburgh Steelers, New York Jets, Carolina Panthers, Cincinnati Bengals and Indianapolis Colts. More trips are expected to be set after LSU's pro day.

NFL draft profile: No. 25 — UCLA pass rusher Takkarist McKinley, explosive with injury concern

By Eric Edholm

Yahoo.com

April 3, 2017

25. UCLA pass rusher Takkarist McKinley
6-foot-2, 250 pounds

Key stat: McKinley improved his big-play production in each of his three seasons with the Bruins — from 3.5 tackles for loss and 2.5 sacks in 2014 (10 games, one start) to 7.5 TFLs and 4.5 sacks in 2015 (12 starts) to 18 TFLs and 10 sacks in 2016 (11 starts).

The skinny: Cal signee failed to make grades coming out of high school, so he spent a year at Contra Costa College in 2013 before ending up at UCLA. Worked his way into the rotation as a sophomore and steadily improved over the course of his career, earning all-Pac-12 first team mention by averaging second in the conference in both sacks per game and TFLs per game.

Suffered a shoulder injury in a 2015 game against Arizona State and played through the injury for more than a year. Skipped the Senior Bowl with what was diagnosed as a torn labrum but opted to perform at the NFL scouting combine (and even lifted on the bench press), which he called a “dream come true.” Had surgery immediately following the combine to repair the labrum and a cracked glenoid and was expected to require rehab for the following 4-6 months. But McKinley vowed to be ready for training camp, which starts in late July, even though the long end of that timetable might knock out his entire preseason and put Week 1 in jeopardy.

McKinley turns 22 during the NFL season.

Best-suited destination: McKinley rushed as a down lineman from both sides and likely could do that in the NFL, although his lack of bulk might make him a pass-rush specialist in a 4-3 front or project him more to a 3-4 OLB position. We could see teams with a wide variety of schemes — such as the Dallas Cowboys, Pittsburgh Steelers, Cleveland Browns, Detroit Lions, San Francisco 49ers, Baltimore Ravens and many more — being able to find good use for this raw but explosive edge rusher’s skills.

Upside: High-energy rusher who comes out ready to play every week. Seems to make at least one effort play per game, if not more. Tough player who played through shoulder pain for a season and a half, and improved performance over that time. Great burst and athleticism. Possesses the speed to blow by tackles before they get out of their stances. Can change direction quickly and has a spin move that is getting better. Long arms (nearly 35 inches) to swat down passes. Made a lot of plays near, at or behind the line of scrimmage. Repped out 24 lifts on the bench despite those long arms and the shoulder injury. Also ran a 4.59-second 40-yard dash, broad jumped 122 inches and looked shredded at the combine weigh-in. Has natural instincts for the position. Rushes with equal adeptness from either side and was used as a stand-up “Joker” rusher at times. Held up well in tough individual matchups.

Had three sacks (one a strip sack) and five tackles for loss against Utah, including some great head-to-head battles with Utes OT Garrett Boles, a first-round talent. Here's McKinley keeping his balance against the cut-block attempt of OT Sam Tevi, a mid-round prospect, and converting speed to power quickly:

Downside: Short height and limited bulk — he might be close to being maxed out, weight-wise — could limit his role in certain schemes. Injury timetable is a big concern for general managers and coaches, who might not be able to count on him being ready for the start of his rookie season. Can wear down by the ends of games and might not be a 60-snap-per-game pro. Appeared to be less effective in higher-paced games. Battles to a lot of stalemates, even against tight ends, backs and slower guards. Has trouble locating the ball at times. Several pressures came off second-effort plays (which is good but also shows he's not winning off the snap as much as the numbers would appear) and quarterbacks holding the ball longer than they will against NFL rhythm passing games.

McKinley can go quiet for long stretches in games. Had strangely poor games against lesser talent. Still requires more core strength to hold up. Must develop countermoves and employ better hand usage. Not the most technically gifted rusher. Not yet a fully refined run defender and might never be great in that area. Turned in poor times in the 3-cone drill and 20-yard shuttle at the combine, which make a projection to a 3-4 OLB spot less obvious.

Scouting hot take: "I question the decision [to delay the surgery]. He could have had it as early as December, and he'd be better off. We now have to put a red mark next to his name on our board because we don't really know where he'll be at health-wise. We'll know more at the [combine medical] recheck, but that's still taking a risk. I am not sure who advised him on that." — AFC college scouting director

Player comp: When we watched McKinley rush from multiple techniques, including as an "A gap" blitzer, we immediately thought of Whitney Mercilus, who took time to develop but now is one of the game's best QB hunters and a very solid all-around defender.

Expected draft range: Top 40 picks

NFL QB tiers: From franchise guys to just guys, where your likely starter ranks

By Jason La Canfora

CBSSports.com

April 3, 2017

A year ago I engaged in one of the ultimate exercises in futility, trying to loosely rank the 32 likely NFL starting quarterbacks into tiers. I sought to find natural points of delineation between clusters of passers.

One spring later, I'm going to double down on the matter and take a look back at last year's list and adjust it accordingly. I'll be grading myself, more or less, and taking stock of which QBs are rising and which have taken a tumble, perhaps for good. As a reminder from a year ago, this isn't a 1-32 ranking, per se, but more of me trying to find seven firm categories that apply across the board, and then seeing which quarterbacks make the most sense within them.

I opted to limit it to 32 quarterbacks again this season. There are five additions to the list from a year ago -- Dak Prescott, Jimmy Garoppolo, Mike Glennon, Josh McCown and Brian Hoyer -- and six departures: Ryan Fitzpatrick, Blaine Gabbert Robert Griffin III, Teddy Bridgewater, Brock Osweiler and Jay Cutler. I opted to leave Tony Romo within the top 32, because I still believe he is a starting quarterback in 2017, somewhere. And by somewhere, I mean you, Houston, which explains the absence of Tom Savage or, gulp, Brandon Weeden from this list.

I also don't have any of the Browns' current quarterbacks on the list -- sorry, Osweiler -- because I am holding that spot open for Garoppolo. Frankly, I'm very comfortable with Jimmy G on this list rather than any number of stop-gap backups like Matt Schaub, Chase Daniel, Case Keenum, etc.

If you currently are without a contract -- Cutler, Fitzpatrick, Colin Kaepernick -- at this stage of the offseason, you aren't on the list. I went back and forth on adding Trevor Siemian to the ledger, but in the end I stuck with Paxton Lynch, who represented the Broncos here a year ago. All things being equal, I expect Lynch to win that job eventually this year, although, for the record, I would put Siemian in Tier 5 (guys, veterans and place holders) if he were included.

Some of the biggest risers include Matt Ryan, who bounced back in 2017 with an MVP campaign after one of the worst seasons of his career. Matthew Stafford, Ryan Tannehill and Tyrod Taylor showed me enough to get a nice bump up a few tiers as well. As I wrote a year ago, I agonized over putting Taylor in at least Tier 4 a year ago. On the other end of the spectrum, Joe Flacco and Carson Palmer took a tumble, and while I was only lukewarm on Blake Bortles to begin with (he didn't crack my rising stars category), he plummeted, too.

By and large I feel pretty good about my maiden voyage with this list a year ago and mostly there are cosmetic changes, like shipping out a journeyman at the bottom of the list in place of another

journeyman who has now secured that starting job. I think I'd give myself a solid B, overall, for the 2016 effort. Below I break down the tiers again and show where I differ from a year ago:

Tier 1: Bona fide franchise quarterbacks

2016: Tom Brady, Aaron Rodgers, Ben Roethlisberger, Russell Wilson, Cam Newton

2017: Brady, Rodgers, Roethlisberger, Wilson, Newton, Drew Brees

I struggled with where to put Brees a year ago and after much hand wringing I barely slotted him in Tier 2, with concerns about Father Time catching up to him and how much the Saints had to throw the ball from behind and what that might mean for his health moving forward. But he should've been in this group all along and he showed it again in 2016. I'm giving Newton a mulligan because he had no offensive line and other teams were allowed to assault him, beginning with the opener in Denver a year ago.

Tier 2: Top pros, proven winners

2016: Brees, Tony Romo, Joe Flacco, Eli Manning, Philip Rivers, Carson Palmer

2017: Matt Ryan, Manning, Rivers, Derek Carr, Matthew Stafford, Romo

I've long been bullish on Carr, and his MVP-like campaign hastened his ascent from Tier 3 (rising stars) to this list. It won't be long before he is in the top tier. Stafford's game has improved since joining up with coordinator Jim Bob Cooter and cutting down on some mistakes. I still believe Romo can be a very high-end starter if given the chance, though this obviously could be his last stand. Will Ryan drop off some after losing coordinator Kyle Shanahan to the 49ers and losing the Super Bowl in dramatic fashion? Regardless, barring a total flop he belongs in this tier.

Tier 3: Rising stars

2016: Marcus Mariota, Jameis Winston, Andrew Luck, Derek Carr

2017: Mariota, Winston, Luck, Dak Prescott, Carson Wentz, Jimmy Garoppolo

Luck's serious injury turn the last two seasons has to give you pause. He's going to miss this entire offseason and who knows how much of the preseason recovering from shoulder surgery and his ascent has stalled some the past two years. Mariota and Winston could end up in Tier 1 before all is said and done. I also refuse to believe that the Pats squat on Garoppolo for multiple years and I would love to see what he can do starting every Sunday. Prescott's 2016 season was historic and took the league by storm after Romo got hurt again in the preseason. We'll see if there is any sophomore slump with expectations now sky high. Wentz is also on the right trajectory in Philly.

Tier 4: You can win with them

2016: Andy Dalton, Blake Bortles, Kirk Cousins, Matt Ryan, Matthew Stafford, Teddy Bridgewater

2017: Cousins, Dalton, Tyrod Taylor, Ryan Tannehill

I went back and forth with putting Cousins in the second tier after a second-straight franchise record season with the Redskins. If he does it again this season after losing top targets DeSean Jackson and Pierre Garcon in free agency, he'll be there soon enough. Taylor continues to make great decisions with the football and develop. Hopefully some stability in Buffalo will only help him. Tannehill blossomed under quarterback guru Adam Gase and took major strides, though his missing offseason work recovering from a knee injury is hardly ideal.

Tier 5: Guys, veterans and place holders

2016: Alex Smith, Ryan Fitzpatrick, Jay Cutler

2017: Smith, Flacco, Palmer, Josh McCown, Brian Hoyer, Mike Glennon, Sam Bradford

Flacco needs a bounce-back season after going through expected rough patches in his return from ACL surgery a year ago. He still has no weapons and Baltimore's defense has fallen off significantly from its stint as a perennial Super Bowl threat and pressure is mounting for Flacco to get back to top form. He's thrown 17 interceptions in the last two seasons (26 games), which has to stop. This is Palmer's last stand, after seriously contemplating retirement a year ago. I have tempered expectations, at best, for Glennon in Chicago, and Bradford takes a small step up from a year ago after staying healthy and managing the game with the Vikings.

Tier 6: Good luck

2016: Taylor, RG III, Brock Osweiler, Tannehill, Bradford, Blaine Gabbert

2017: Bortles

Well, I certainly had the Osweiler thing tagged. What. A. Disaster. I suspect we've seen the last of RG3 or Gabbert starting an NFL game for quite some time, if not forever. Bortles may be on his last legs in Jacksonville -- anything close to his 2016 play and Tom Coughlin will be moving on from him.

Tier 7: The verdict is out

2016: Jared Goff, Paxton Lynch

2017: Goff, Lynch

Nothing has changed much here, other than the fact that these two are very raw was amplified in their limited debuts as rookies. Former Rams coach Jeff Fisher held off on playing Goff longer than anyone else on the planet thought possible -- he always seemed to have trepidation about how ready the kid was -- and Lynch got a few chances to play and flashed a bit but largely looked like someone learning to think and play like a pro quarterback for the first time. There is still plenty of potential for both, but it's fair to say the verdict remains out. And soon enough we might say the same for Mitch Trubisky, Pat

Mahomes and the four or five kids taken in the first round at the end of the month, though I suspect only one to two, at most, get the chance to play regularly in 2017.

Green Bay wants to host a draft, though “it’s probably a long shot”

By Darin Gantt
Pro Football Talk
April 3, 2017

With the 2017 NFL Draft being held outdoors in Philadelphia this year, one of the league’s most historic outdoor venues wants in on the action in the future.

Of course, Packers preside Mark Murphy admits “it’s probably a long shot,” the team has still submitted a bid to host a draft in either 2019, 2020 or 2021.

Via Ryan Wood of the Green Bay Press-Gazette, Murphy said they could use the Resch Center (a 10,000-seat indoor venue across the street) if the weather was an issue, but the complicating factor might be the shortage of hotel rooms in the area as they’re developing the property around Lambeau Field.

“We’ve put some thought into it,” Murphy said. “I think with Tiletown being up and running then, it’d be a nice way to showcase some of the things that we’ve done to Lambeau Field and around the stadium.”

Murphy acknowledged the competition for future drafts was significant, with Denver, Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, Jacksonville, Pittsburgh, and Canton also bidding.

Commissioner Roger Goodell has suggested Green Bay would be a “great place” for the event, but there are plenty of people in line with Wisconsin for the right to host, and their efforts to stir up more interest (i.e. create competition) seem to have worked.

Mason's Mailbag: What's next for the changing front seven on the Broncos' defense

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
April 3, 2017

The Super Bowl 50-winning front seven has lost four players in two offseasons (DeMarcus Ware, Sylvester Williams, Danny Trevathan and Malik Jackson). While I feel confident about Shane Ray filling one of the slots, what are the plans for the very middle of the defense (NT, DE and ILB)? Domata Peko, Adam Gotsis and Todd Davis? IMHO, this is an area of concern if the run defense is to improve.

-- Jose Borrero

On the defensive line, Peko is the likely starter at nose tackle; Head Coach Vance Joseph will count on him to draw the double-teams he warranted in Cincinnati. Free-agent pickup Zach Kerr will factor in at defensive end. Kerr should allow Jared Crick to be used as more of a pass-rush specialist than he was last year, when Vance Walker's injury forced Crick into an every-down role that was not part of the original plan up front. As for Gotsis, much will depend on the result of his work in the weight room. Defensive Line Coach Bill Kollar noted in February that strength had to be Gotsis' highest priority. He should be in the rotation; whether he becomes a starter depends on how much he improves.

At inside linebacker, the Broncos gave a restricted free-agent tender to Davis. This is only his second season as a full-time starter; he should improve. Joseph noted last Tuesday that better play up front should give Davis and Brandon Marshall more room to operate and more chances to make plays against the run. Marshall should also be better if he can avoid the nagging injuries that slowed him last season.

If a player is drafted, is he under any legal obligation to go with the team that drafted him?

-- Jesse Conroy

There is no legal obligation, per se. It's not like being drafted into the military. If a player wants to avoid playing for the team that picked him, there's nothing to stop him from that. But he can't go play for any of the other 31 clubs unless he is traded.

The drafting team holds a player's rights for his first potential season -- even if he remains unsigned. If a player does not sign a contract with the team that drafted him, he goes back into the pool for the following year's draft.

The most famous example of this situation involves Bo Jackson in 1987. After he did not sign a contract with the Buccaneers -- who drafted him No. 1 overall in 1986 -- and opted to play in the Kansas City Royals' organization, he went back into the draft one year later. The then-Los Angeles Raiders picked Jackson in the seventh round, with the 183rd overall selection.

If the Broncos decide to trade up in the draft to get a guy like Christian McCaffrey or O.J. Howard, how far could you see the Broncos trading up?

-- Ethan Stanton

Based on past draft trades and the standard draft-trade value chart, the Broncos could get up to the 13th or 14th pick by sending their second-round pick in a trade. That's about as far as I would expect the Broncos to move, and even that would be a greater leap than their moves up in the 2015 and 2016 first rounds (five picks each time).

For the past year or two I've seen articles and heard talk about a developmental league so players can get used to playing in a pro system. What I don't get is why can't college football teams transition from spread offenses to pro-style. It would make the learning curve less steep, especially for quarterbacks and linemen.

-- Tosh Holmes

Because on the field, college teams have the same goal as those in the NFL: to win. The college game is not a designated feeder system to the NFL -- even though for all intents and purposes, it is. Therefore, player development for the next level is not the priority, unlike in minor-league baseball or basketball's D-League.

Spread offenses and other schemes that are unorthodox and don't translate well to the NFL -- such as the triple-option attack favored by service academies -- can neutralize size disadvantages and help level the playing field a bit.

Further, colleges want to get their players up to speed in a system quickly; you've only got five seasons (including a potential redshirt year), and truly elite talents often turn pro with multiple seasons of eligibility remaining. Spread offenses are often simpler to learn than pro-style schemes, which is crucial given the limits on practice and meeting time at the college level.

The only way you'll see the kind of developmental process you want is if the NFL creates its own version of the D-League. Although chatter about a developmental league always bubbles just below the surface of league matters, there is no substantive potential plan at this time.

Who do you think would be the best TE for the Broncos next year? Many of the mock drafts I have seen have the Broncos picking Bucky Hodges, Jake Butt or Evan Engram but do you think that would be giving up on Derby too early?

-- Nathan Seiler

Drafting a tight end does not mean you're "giving up" on A.J. Derby, Jeff Heuerman or Virgil Green. If anything, if the Broncos draft a tight end in the first three rounds, I expect to see more two-tight end formations, just like the ones Offensive Coordinator Mike McCoy used at times in San Diego last year to get Antonio Gates and then-rookie Hunter Henry on the field together.

As for those tight ends you mentioned, I think Hodges is the most versatile and the most capable of causing mismatches, with the best blend of size and speed in that group. Engram has plenty of potential, but is 23 pounds lighter than Hodges, so can he be an in-line tight end? If he can handle that part of the role, he should flourish and would be an outstanding Day 2 pick. South Alabama's Gerald Everett does a lot of the same things that O.J. Howard can do and will be an outstanding Day 2 bargain.

Why are so many people acting like it's the end of the world if the Broncos don't pursue Tony Romo or get him and stay the course with their young QBs? Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch were both essentially rookies last season and are young and everyone is treating them like five-year veterans who can't get any better.

-- Katherine S

Because panic and fear of the unknown collectively comprise the default state of humanity. Both are exacerbated by the communications environment of 2017, driven by speed above patience. For example, just imagine if John Elway's rookie season was subject to the need for immediate judgment that drives the current landscape of discourse.

As I've said on radio appearances and podcasts more than a few times this offseason, I'm baffled by the notion some possess -- this school of thought that Siemian cannot get better. Maybe he and Lynch have different ceilings if everything breaks right, but to think that the third-year quarterback cannot improve in a new scheme with more experience -- and better health -- is short-sighted.

If Siemian starts in 2017, yes, he will be at a fork-in-the-road point in his career -- his second season as a starter, his third in the NFL. That's the time when you must display your long-term potential (and this is true at most positions). Some quarterbacks have regressed in their second seasons as starters. But plenty have improved. Why can't Siemian?

Now, into the wayback machine ...

@Jezru

@MaseDenver We were talking about Gaston Green. After his pro-bowl season with the Broncos, what led to his departure? Rod Bernstein? Why?

Green had some knee troubles in 1992, yet still managed to play in 14 games that year. But he never shook off a slow start to the season; he averaged just 2.66 yards per rush in the first six games. In nine of 14 games, he failed to even average 3.20 yards per carry. Green's size (190 pounds) also worked against him, leading to questions about his durability. Thus, the Broncos considered running back a need in 1993 -- the first year of the current free-agent system -- and signed Rod Bernstine and Robert Delpino.

It said a lot about how far Green fell into disfavor early in 1993 that the Broncos were willing to trade him within the division, to the then-Los Angeles Raiders. It said even more about what Green had left that the Raiders released him in Week 2 of that season, having averaged just 2.2 yards per carry in preseason play. He never carried the football in an NFL regular-season game after the trade.