

DeMarcus Ware opens up about retirement, time with the Broncos, more

By Nicki Jhabvala

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DeMarcus Ware's eyes peer down at the list in front of him and a grin slowly forms.

"Let me see this," he says as he grabs the booklet and his glasses, then eases back into his chair.

For minutes Ware sits and stares, scouring the list of victimized quarterbacks and reflecting on his 138.5 sacks over his 12-year NFL career. Memories flood his mind, and his grin grows wider with each.

He recalls that time he got Peyton Manning.

"That was a good one," he says with a chuckle.

He jokingly thinks of the relief Eli Manning must feel after taking 14.5 of those sacks.

He thinks of the toughest one to get: Philip Rivers.

"I still don't know what it means, really," Ware says. "I guess it means hard work. I think it's just all hard work, and technique learned over time. And having fun."

This is a first for the recent retiree. Never before has Ware sat and looked back over his statistical accomplishments as one of the NFL's leading pass-rushers. Back at his home outside Dallas, he has bins stuffed with all the newspapers and magazine stories written about him. He kept every one, but he never allowed himself to see them as a player.

Humility leads to greatness, he says.

"I told myself, 'Don't get caught up. Stay focused and keep your head down and everything will be all right,'" he says. "That's always been my motto: If you don't get caught up in the hype, you can do something great."

As does making the right but often difficult decisions.

In February, during the week of festivities for Super Bowl LI in Houston, Ware told anyone who would listen that he was coming back for a 13th NFL season. And he meant every word. Two months had passed since his back surgery, and he felt better than he did when he signed with Denver in 2014.

He was ready. His mind, his body — ready.

But on March 13, after weeks of introspection, he surprised the NFL — his coaches and teammates included — with a message on Twitter that read: "After a lot of thought and prayer, I've decided to accept the unknown and retire from my NFL career."

As soon as he clicked “publish,” a wave of relief rushed over him before an onslaught of emotions hit.

For two days, he sat alone, thinking, reflecting and praying.

Something changed in Ware between early February and mid-March, and it had nothing to do with opportunity, or lack thereof. Ware had offers from three teams — the Rams, Cowboys and Broncos — and he believes he could have performed well for any of them. In fact, he admits that had his contract with the Broncos not expired, he would have been back this year.

But his recent thoughts extended beyond 2017.

“You start thinking about your quality of life,” he says. “You still have the desire to get out there and play and compete and win championships. But my body was talking to me.”

What if his troublesome back were to give out when he tried to lift his 9-year-old daughter? What if he could no longer playfully wrestle with his 6-year-old son, or help coach him in flag football?

“Football life is pretty short,” says Ware, 34. “But your life after football is a long time, and what type of quality do you have?”

A difficult decision

Walking away was hard, and for Ware, his improved health made it even harder. The searing pain he suffered for nearly two years with the Broncos is no longer there, and the perpetual nicks that come with a career in the NFL no longer plague him. But it was still time.

“It wasn’t about the money anymore,” he says. “It was about a way of life. How do I want to live? Because I knew God gave me 12 years to play this game, and now we’ve cleaned up everything those 12 years have cost my body. Going out here one more year and possibly tearing it up — is it worth it?”

Few outside the Broncos’ locker room knew just how bad it got for Ware, with the bulging disc in his back that led to an infection in the 2016 offseason and eventually ruptured last year. Few knew that when he rang up 3.5 sacks in the Broncos’ 2015 postseason, he was in agony. Few knew the depth of the frustration Ware felt as he returned from one major injury (the back) last September, only to suffer another one two games in with a fractured forearm that was never really pain-free after surgery.

In two years with Denver, Ware missed 10 games because of injuries.

“Retirement still didn’t cross my mind,” he says, thinking back to last season. “For me, it was what I had to take to endure the pain — all the pain meds I had to take. No one is really fully healthy. I don’t care what anyone says. Not in football, where you have no regard for your body and you just go out there and play.

“Once I herniated my disc last season — and I played for like three games with a herniated disc — I’d sit down in meetings not knowing if I’d be able to get up. This is stuff people don’t know you go through because I love playing football. I love the Denver Broncos. It’s a passion of mine because I’m not just playing for myself; I’m playing for those other guys and I’m leading those guys in any way possible.

When I get out there for the game, I can see the smile on the guys' faces because they know what I endured the whole week just to get out there."

Ware didn't know it at the time, but his career ended on Christmas Day in Kansas City, the same time and place his former coach Gary Kubiak decided enough was enough, too.

"That game, I was hurting so bad," Ware says. "I told myself, 'You need to just get yourself fixed.'"

The word "retirement" typically brings discomfort. Ware couldn't fathom uttering the word two months ago, and even still it feels strange.

But scary? Nerve-wracking? Nah. Not for Ware.

Excited for the future

Following his two days of reflection and prayer after quietly announcing his decision on social media, any uneasiness Ware felt turned to excitement and a renewed vigor.

"From that point, the weight was lifted off me and I felt a big relief," he says. "I'm not nervous at all. I'm curious. I'm really curious about what's next. But I'm one of those people who prepares and strategizes and whatever I get into, that becomes me and I enjoy it and love it."

Ware's days now are split between Denver and Dallas, and the plan is to keep it that way. He loves both cities and calls both home, and when the Cowboys play the Broncos this season, he hopes to be there, rooting on former teammates from both sides.

Finally, though, Ware can look back and relive the moments. When asked about his top accomplishment in the game, he evades talk of numbers and cites his role as a leader and mentor to guys like Von Miller and Shane Ray. When asked if he could change anything about his career, he pauses before saying: "I gave it everything I had, so from a football standpoint, there was nothing more I could do. But from a mentor standpoint, I feel like I should have done more, not just in the locker room, but have like a group and bring all the guys together and talk about life and delve even deeper so you can change guys off the field."

Ware wants his legacy built on his teaching life-coaching. But looking back, he says, is different from looking in the rear-view mirror. This retirement is definite.

"Once I make a decision, that's it," he says.

Phase 2 for Ware is well underway, but he's not giving away any secrets. He can in retirement — there are no rules — but he won't just yet.

"I'm been working on some things," he says slyly. "Just still trying to keep the football atmosphere where I can touch guys' lives and still be in the locker room and still talk to them and still try to effect change. Right now I'm spending a lot of time with family, and I'm enjoying that time.

"But now I can go back and open those bins."

Broncos' Kapri Bibbs, Bennie Fowler sign exclusive rights tenders

By Cameron Wolfe
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Two more Broncos are officially locked up for 2017. Broncos running back Kapri Bibbs and receiver Bennie Fowler signed their exclusive rights tenders Thursday.

Bibbs and Fowler both will play on their one-year, \$615,000 contract. These signings are little more than a formality because players can only sign with the team that tendered them.

Center Matt Paradis, wide receiver Jordan Taylor and long snapper Casey Kreiter signed their exclusive rights tenders Monday. Three players — outside linebacker Shaquil Barrett, inside linebacker Zaire Anderson and center James Ferentz — still have to sign their tenders.

Phase one of the Broncos' offseason program begins Monday.

Bibbs finally broke through the practice squad barrier, making the 53-man roster out of camp in his third attempt. He held the third running back role for much of the season, but was pressed into more significant action toward the middle of the season when C.J. Anderson went on injured reserve.

Bibbs had 129 yards on 29 carries and added 75 yards receiving and a touchdown on two receptions. His year ended in Week 14 when he was placed on injured reserve with a high-ankle sprain.

Fowler, another former practice squad player, made the Broncos roster for the second consecutive season in 2016, filling the role of special teams regular. He also competed for reps at receiver behind Demaryius Thomas, Emmanuel Sanders and Jordan Norwood.

Fowler finished the season with 11 catches for 145 yards and two touchdowns.

The Broncos also placed second-round tenders on linebacker Todd Davis and kicker Brandon McManus last month. Both players are expected to return to Denver under the one-year, \$2.746 million tender or a long-term deal if it can be worked out.

Other teams can sign Davis and McManus to an offer sheet up until April 21, but the Broncos would have an opportunity to match and the acquiring team would forfeit a second-round pick if they didn't.

Ex-teammates Anthony Lynn and Vance Joseph now AFC West rivals

By Eric Williams

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Vance Joseph lived down the block from Anthony Lynn when the two were briefly teammates for the Denver Broncos in 1997 -- Joseph a former, fleet-footed quarterback at the University of Colorado turned cornerback, was released during final roster cuts; Lynn was a bruising, backup running back behind Hall of Famer Terrell Davis.

Lynn went on to win a Super Bowl with the Broncos during the 1997 season. The two will now compete against each other in the AFC West, with Lynn hired as the head coach of the Los Angeles Chargers this offseason and Joseph brought on in the same role for the Broncos.

The two matched wits a year ago when Lynn was the offensive coordinator for the Buffalo Bills and Joseph was the defensive coordinator for the Miami Dolphins. Now they will square off twice a year again as head coaches in the AFC West.

"I've known Anthony and his family for a long time," Joseph said. "It's going to be fun. He's a first-timer, I'm a first-timer and we play them twice a year.

"He's a good man. He's a great leader. We played against each other twice last year. The first time I won the stats battle. The second time we won the game, but he won the stats battle."

As Joseph alluded to, the Dolphins won both games against the Buffalo Bills last season with Joseph as defensive coordinator. In the second game, the Bills racked up nearly 600 yards of offense.

"I'm very close with Vance," Lynn said. "[He expects the Broncos to play] smart football, with a good defense and a balanced attack. When we won our championships when Vance was with us, that's what we did. That's what we know. I expect Vance to try and do the same thing."

Kansas City Chiefs coach Andy Reid is now the most senior head coach of the AFC West as he enters his fifth season with the team. However, Reid wasn't offering much help for the newbies in Lynn and Joseph when asked if he had any words of wisdom at the NFL owners meetings last week in Phoenix.

"I'd rather wait to give them advice," Reid said, chuckling. "Listen, they're coming into good situations, with good teams and good players. They'll be fine. It will be great competition. I don't see a big drop-off with either one of those teams."

Vance Joseph doesn't mind plenty of cooks in offense's kitchen

By Jeff Legwold

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When the Denver Broncos return to the team's complex next week for the start of their offseason workouts, the defensive playbook that awaits will look largely the same as it did the previous two seasons.

The playbook on offense, however, figures to be under construction. That's because the Broncos don't know who their starting quarterback will be, and until that decision gets made there can be no real finishing touches on the scheme.

But coach Vance Joseph showed he isn't afraid of opinions or experience when he assembled the guys making the decisions about what the offense will look like. It's a veteran group that includes three coaches who have called plays in the NFL and a former interim head coach for the Broncos.

"I think we embrace a veteran staff," Joseph said just before last week's NFL owners meetings. "For me it started with Mike (McCoy). My first call went to Mike and we went from there."

McCoy, a former Chargers head coach now in his second stint in Denver as the coordinator, has set the course for the makeover on offense. He has been tasked with fielding a unit that blocks better, runs the ball better and scores more touchdowns than it did last season.

To do that, he and Joseph also embraced the idea of adding former play-callers to the mix -- that more opinions are better as the Broncos try to iron out some significant wrinkles. Quarterbacks coach Bill Musgrave called plays for Oakland last season during the Raiders' 12-4 season that thrust quarterback Derek Carr into the MVP conversation until a late-season injury.

Denver tight ends coach Geep Chryst has been an offensive coordinator for the Chargers and 49ers. And running backs coach Eric Stutesville has been promoted to assistant head coach with Joseph's arrival and is now the longest-tenured coach with the Broncos.

Stutesville arrived in 2010 -- Josh McDaniels' last season -- and was the Broncos' interim head coach when McDaniels was fired with four games left that season. He has since served on the staffs of John Fox and Gary Kubiak before being retained by Joseph.

"Eric's been there the longest, he's been there six years, so he knows the locker room," Joseph said. "He knows the players in the locker room. That's Eric's role outside of coaching the running backs. The pulse of the locker room goes through Eric Stutesville."

These are coaches who have been in charge, made decisions and plotted the course. How the Broncos make that work will determine how smoothly they transition from Kubiak's offense to McCoy's.

"Mike McCoy wanted Musgrave and he wanted Geep Chryst, those were Mike's hires," Joseph said.

"Mike had no concern with that issue. Mike has been a head coach, so he gets the big picture. The more good ideas you have, the better you are going to be on Sunday."

Executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway said of McCoy: "I'm excited to have Mike back. We know what Mike's about, and he's shown he finds the best way to fit players into the offense we want to have and produce."

McCoy has shown versatility in his previous stint with the Broncos, having torn apart a more traditional pro-style offense to install an option-oriented offense for quarterback Tim Tebow during the 2011 season. McCoy and Dolphins head coach Adam Gase then dismantled that playbook the following offseason for a no-huddle based attack run by future Hall of Fame quarterback Peyton Manning.

"I feel like I've worked with a lot of different kinds of quarterbacks," McCoy said this year. "We're going to work through everything we want to do, look at our players, see who the quarterback is and we're going to make the best decisions we think will help us win. That's our standard, do the things that put us in the best position to help us win games."

Said Joseph: "When you build a system offensively or defensively, you kind of build a big room and you put all of your tools inside of it. I think weekly -- or by player -- you pull things out that fit the player. When you're building a system, it's not pin-point what you're going to do all fall. It's a big room full of tools, and weekly you pull them out. What fits that defense? What fits that player? What fits the scheme? So when I say system, it's an overview of what it's going to look like. Inside of that, you can adjust very easily."

Montee Ball reveals what went wrong in his time with Broncos

By Jeff Legwold
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Montee Ball has come forth with a reason his career with the Denver Broncos never got off the ground.

He was consuming alcohol, heavily and often.

Ball, a second-round pick by the Broncos in 2013 who had been waived by 2015, told The Sporting News this week that he got drunk four times a week during his NFL career and that he didn't "take any of it seriously."

There had been rumors Ball had significant struggles off the field in his time in Denver -- he told TSN his heavy drinking began in 2011 when he was a junior at the University of Wisconsin. But Ball was publicly engaging and had rushed for 559 yards as a rookie on a team that advanced to the Super Bowl.

He said in training camp in 2014: "I can be this team's starter. I believe it and I believe I can consistently have an impact in this offense." He did open the 2014 season as the starter, but he missed all but five games that year because of a groin injury.

And training camp in 2015 was little more than an exercise in frustration for both himself and the team. He opened camp No. 2 on the depth chart but fell to No. 4 in the final weeks.

He had just 32 total carries in Denver's four preseason games and averaged 2.1 yards per carry. Aside from a 12-yard run and an 8-yard in his preseason appearances that year, he averaged just 1.6 yards per carry as coaches privately said he looked sluggish.

After the Broncos had initially kept him when rosters went to 53 players just before the start of the regular season, he was waived the next day.

Executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway said the day before Ball was waived that "we still think that Montee, hopefully, can continue to improve."

Ball has not carried the ball in an NFL game since and hasn't been with a team since a stint on the New England Patriots' practice squad in 2015.

Ball told TSN he is enrolled at Wisconsin for summer classes.

"I was naïve enough to think my playing days would last forever," Ball said in the interview. "I would literally sit in the back of the room texting or being on Instagram not paying attention to the professional explaining to me about preparing for life after football and how important it is. I failed to use my platform to help others and to use the NFL as a stepping-stone in life. I surrounded myself with bad people, not on the team but in the city. I was naïve enough to believe I had all the answers. I'm still kicking myself in the butt for that."

Some Broncos players said, during Ball's time with the Broncos and have said since, that running backs coach Eric Stutesville tried to push Ball into the right direction, both on and off the field. Ball also said in the interview that Stutesville offered to get the player help.

"I didn't listen to him," Ball said.

In the interview, Ball also revealed he watched the Broncos' Super Bowl 50 win over the Carolina Panthers from a jail cell after an arrest on a battery charge two days before that title game. Ball was eventually sentenced to 60 days in jail last August after pleading guilty to disorderly conduct and battery for his role in two domestic-abuse incidents.

The Broncos selected Ball with the 58th pick of the 2013 draft, three picks before the Green Bay Packers selected running back Eddie Lacy. At the time, the Broncos said they had concerns a foot injury would impact Lacy's pro career.

The Kansas City Chiefs selected Pro Bowl tight end Travis Kelce five picks after the Broncos had selected Ball. The Broncos have none of the players they selected in the 2013 draft on the current roster as the last two from the seven-player class -- Sylvester Williams and Kayvon Webster -- signed with the Tennessee Titans and Los Angeles Rams, respectively, in free agency last month.

Stacking the best classes in NFL draft history

By Brian Burke and Doug Clawson

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The path to franchise success in the NFL has always been the draft, and picking great players remains essential to building a winner. So we were curious: Which draft provided each NFL team with its best haul of talent?

To find each team's best draft class ever, first we had to define "best." Fortunately, there's Pro Football Reference's Approximate Value (AV) metric. AV is a composite measure of a player's value to his team, based roughly on game appearances, game starts and awards such as Pro Bowl and All-Pro selections. Meaningful individual stats also help determine a player's AV, and the metric is boosted for players who are members of winning teams.

There have been 50 NFL drafts in what is known as the common draft era (since 1967), and we limited our rankings to this period. We added the AV for every pick in every class while with that team. Two other key caveats:

1. Before the era of unrestricted free agency began in 1992, teams had greater ability to keep players under team control, allowing more value to accrue to drafting teams for the purposes of this exercise.
2. The draft was 17 rounds from 1967 to 1976, and later moved to 12 rounds before being reduced to its current seven-round iteration in 1994. That matters, because our methodology definitely favors depth of class -- the more players in a class, the more possibilities for AV-related success -- and we think that's the best reflection of the impact that can be generated by a single NFL draft class. Smaller classes including one or two stars can make an impact, too, but history confirms that it's the higher-volume classes that more frequently help fuel enduring team success.

1. 1975 Dallas Cowboys (551 AV)

The Cowboys' class of 1975 proved the most productive draft class of any team in the common draft era. The group was known as "The Dirty Dozen," because 11 picks and one undrafted player made the final roster, headlined by Hall of Fame defensive tackle Randy White, the second overall pick in '75. Five members of the class became Pro Bowlers: White, linebackers Thomas "Hollywood" Henderson and Bob Breunig, tackle Pat Donovan and guard Herbert Scott. And five started the Cowboys' Super Bowl XII win over the Denver Broncos following the 1977 season.

2. 1971 Pittsburgh Steelers (526 AV)

The Steelers' 1974 draft class is often considered the best in NFL history for producing four Hall of Famers, twice as many as any class. But their 1971 class was deeper and might deserve more credit for propelling Pittsburgh to four Super Bowl titles in the 1970s. The class produced eight Super Bowl starters, including Hall of Fame LB Jack Ham (second round) and two-time Pro Bowl selections in defensive end Dwight White (fourth round) and strong safety Mike Wagner (11th round).

The 1974 Steelers class (including Hall of Famers Jack Lambert, Lynn Swann, John Stallworth and Mike Webster) would rank right behind the '71 class as the Steelers' best and would rank tied for third-best of any team (486). If you want to say '74 was better than '71, we won't argue.

3. 1981 New Orleans Saints (486 AV)

This class featured the No. 1 overall pick, Heisman Trophy-winning RB George Rogers, who ran for 1,674 yards as a rookie, Hall of Fame linebacker Rickey Jackson and other key contributors such as Pro Bowl tight end Hoby Brenner (third round) and defensive tackle Jim Wilks (12th round). The Saints' 1981 selectees might be the best draft class to never see postseason success. Though Jackson, Brenner and Wilks were among those who lasted long enough in New Orleans to see the Saints' string of playoff appearances from 1990 through 1992, the team never made it out of the wild-card round.

The 17-player class was the most productive in Saints history, but the 2006 class deserves an honorable mention. It was easily the most productive of class by any team since 2000, featuring RB Reggie Bush, S Roman Harper, G Jahri Evans and two seventh-rounders who played nearly 150 games with the Saints (G Zach Strief and WR Marques Colston). The signing of Drew Brees that year gets much of the credit for the team's Super Bowl win, but New Orleans' 2006 draft class shouldn't be overlooked.

4. 1975 Chicago Bears (473 AV)

This very deep class is headlined by one of the greatest running backs in NFL history, Walter Payton, who would carry the Bears' Super Bowl XX offense a decade later. Defensive end Mike Hartenstine was the other standout from this class. He played for 13 seasons and had eight starts for the '85 championship defense.

The 1965 class was before the common draft era, but it featured Hall of Famers Gale Sayers and Dick Butkus, who were picked Nos. 3 and No. 4 overall, respectively. But even if we included this group, its 347 AV pales in comparison with the '75 Bears class because of Sayers' and Butkus' relatively short careers.

5. 1977 New York Jets (435 AV)

This Jets class immediately followed Joe Namath's final season with the team and helped New York reach four postseasons in a six-year span, from 1981-86. The class featured tackle Marvin Powell (first round), wide receiver Wesley Walker (second round), and fan favorite/defensive tackle Joe Klecko (sixth round), an important piece of the famed "New York Sack Exchange."

6. 1973 Denver Broncos (406 AV)

The Broncos did not have a single winning season in their first 13 seasons, before the 1973 class marked the turning point in the franchise's fortunes, helping them reach the Super Bowl by the 1977 season. They hit on four of their first five picks in '73, including RB Otis Armstrong, who led the NFL in rushing in 1974, and LB Tom Jackson, who anchored the "Orange Crush" defense.

7. 1986 San Francisco 49ers (402 AV)

The 49ers' 1986 class might have been the deepest in history, featuring six players who played at least 100 games with San Francisco, including Hall of Famer DE Charles Haley; WR John Taylor, who caught the game-winning TD in the final seconds of Super Bowl XXIII; and Tom Rathman, a longtime backfield staple. This class provided a total of 53 seasons worth of players who would serve as primary starters.

8. 1968 Oakland Raiders (401 AV)

Hall of Famers Ken Stabler (second round) and Art Shell (third round) headlined Oakland's 1968 class, which would eventually lead the Raiders to their first Super Bowl title. Interestingly, the Raiders' first-round pick, Eldridge Dickey, provided almost no AV to Oakland. Dickey was drafted as a QB but moved to wideout when Stabler controversially won the starting job in training camp. Dickey would register only five catches in his NFL career.

9. 1985 Buffalo Bills (391 AV)

In 1985 the Bills drafted Bruce Smith, who went on to become the NFL's all-time sack leader in a Hall of Fame career, and WR Andre Reed, who also made the Hall of Fame. Both were important pieces of the team that won four straight AFC Championships. The NFL had competition from the USFL during this era, and Bills general manager Bill Polian had to convince Smith, the No. 1 overall pick, to play for the Bills instead of the USFL's Baltimore Stars.

10. 1996 Baltimore Ravens (384 AV)

The best draft in the Ravens' brief history was their very first. (In fact, the team was still known as the "Baltimore NFL Franchise" at the time of the '96 draft, having yet to choose a nickname after being prevented from using the Browns moniker). The first two picks in team history were Hall of Fame tackle Jonathan Ogden and Ray Lewis, a virtual certainty to be selected to the Hall on his first ballot. Lewis was the heart and soul of the team through 17 seasons, which included nine playoff berths and two Super Bowl championships. Return specialist Jermaine Lewis was another key member of Baltimore's '96 class.

11. 1983 Miami Dolphins (380 AV)

The 1983 draft provided more AV to the league as a whole than any other, and the Dolphins got the lion's share that year. Miami chose franchise QB Dan Marino in the first round and picked up WR Mark Clayton in the eighth, not to mention longtime punter Reggie Roby in the sixth. Marino and Clayton never won a championship but led their team to five playoff berths together.

12. 1975 San Diego Chargers (378 AV)

The Chargers made a whopping 24 picks in 1975, and went nearly all defense. They had four of the first 33 selections, and used three of them to draft three defensive linemen: Hall of Famer Fred Dean, Gary Johnson and Louie Kelcher, who formed "The Bruise Brothers," one of the most dominant lines in football during their era.

13. 1967 Minnesota Vikings (365 AV)

Hall of Fame defensive tackle and NFL MVP Alan Page, selected with the 15th overall pick in '67, anchored the "Purple People Eaters" defense that led Minnesota to four NFC championships. Two-time

Pro Bowl defensive back Bobby Bryant (seventh round) was another key part of the Vikings' legendary defense, and two-time Pro Bowl wide receivers Gene Washington (first round) and Bob Grim (second round) were also selected that year.

14. 1981 Washington Redskins (341 AV)

The Redskins' first two picks were guards Mark May (first round) and Hall of Famer Russ Grimm (third round), part of the famous offensive line group affectionately known as "The Hogs." They also used their fifth-round pick on DE Dexter Manley, who remains the Redskins' all-time sack leader, and their eighth-round pick on wide receiver Charlie Brown. This draft helped Washington win a Super Bowl the following season, and players from this class remained with the Redskins through 1991 and two other championship seasons.

15. 1983 Houston Oilers (337 AV)

Hall of Fame guard Bruce Matthews was the overwhelming standout pick of the then-Oilers' 1983 class. The first-round pick played an incredible 19 seasons with the Oilers/Titans franchise, making 14 Pro Bowls. DBs Keith Bostic (second round) and Steve Brown (third round) were other high-value contributors from this class for Houston.

16. 1978 Green Bay Packers (320 AV)

Hall of Fame WR James Lofton (first round) headlined this class, but linebackers John Anderson (first round) and Mike Douglass (fifth round) were also solid picks. The 2005 Packers class is currently a distant third among Green Bay draft classes, and it's still accumulating AV, thanks to Aaron Rodgers. But Rodgers would have to duplicate his career to date to help his group catch the much deeper '78 Packer class.

Undoubtedly, there are some pre-common era drafts that would rival '78. The 1958 class could be the best Packers class ever, with Hall of Famers Jim Taylor and Ray Nitschke helping to form the foundation of the Packers 1960s dynasty.

17. 1973 New England Patriots (315 AV)

Hall of Fame guard John Hannah highlighted this deep Patriots class. In fact, Hannah has the most AV of any drafted Patriots player other than Tom Brady. Running back Sam Cunningham followed Hannah as the second of three Pats first-rounders in the '73 class, the third being wideout Darryl Stingley, whose career was tragically cut short when he was paralyzed in a preseason game in 1978.

Brady's class of 2000 would need him to play another six or seven years for it to surpass the AV of the '73 group.

18. 2004 Arizona Cardinals (307 AV)

Larry Fitzgerald (first round), Karlos Dansby (second round) and Darnell Dockett (third round) were the Cardinals' first three picks in 2004. Thirteen years later, the class still has three players in the league: Fitzgerald, Dansby and defensive end Antonio Smith (fifth round).

19. 1977 Cincinnati Bengals (307 AV)

The Bengals' 1977 draft class helped form the core of the team that made the franchise's first Super Bowl appearance in the 1981 season. Of the team's 19 selections, 16 made the roster, including one-time Bengals single-season sacks leader Eddie Edwards (first round) and tackle Mike Wilson (fourth round), who never missed a game in his eight seasons with Cincinnati.

20. 1967 Detroit Lions (304 AV)

The Lions' 1967 class featured RB Mel Farr (first round) and Hall of Fame defensive back Lem Barney (second round), who are still the only teammates to win offensive and defensive rookie of the year honors in the same season.

21. 2008 Atlanta Falcons (303 AV)

Matt Ryan (first round) led a deep 2008 Falcons class that also included tackle Sam Baker (first round), linebacker Curtis Lofton (second round), wide receiver Harry Douglas (third round), safety Thomas DeCoud (third round) and linebacker Kroy Biermann (fifth round). Ryan will probably generate several more seasons of strong AV, propelling the '08 Falcons several ranks higher on this list.

22. 1971 Los Angeles Rams (303 AV)

The Rams drafted Hall of Fame defensive end Jack Youngblood and six-time Pro Bowl linebacker Isiah Robertson with their two first-round picks in 1971. Youngblood replaced legend Deacon Jones, and the defensive duo helped the Rams win seven straight division titles, then an NFL record.

23. 1995 Tampa Bay Buccaneers (301 AV)

The Buccaneers drafted Hall of Famers Warren Sapp (No. 12 overall pick) and Derrick Brooks (No. 28 overall) with its two first-round picks. Together, they were the core of the historically great Bucs defense that led the franchise to its lone Super Bowl in 2002. This was a top-heavy draft class; the six other picks for Tampa that year combined to play just three seasons with the Buccaneers.

24. 2001 Indianapolis Colts (300 AV)

Reggie Wayne (first round) highlighted a 2001 class that also included tackle Ryan Diem (fourth round), who started for 11 seasons in Indianapolis. Hard as it might be to believe, this class outproduced the 1998 Peyton Manning class in terms of AV, because the next-best player in '98 was center Steve McKinney, who started for four seasons in Indy.

25. 1973 Philadelphia Eagles (297 AV)

The Eagles' top four draft picks from 1973 all played 150-plus games with the Eagles and laid the foundation for the 1980 Super Bowl run. That class included tackle Jerry Sisemore (first round), tight end Charle Young (first round), center Guy Morriss (second round) and safety Randy Logan (third round).

26. 1993 New York Giants (293 AV)

The Giants selected Hall of Fame defensive end Michael Strahan (second round) and five-time Pro-Bowl linebacker Jessie Armstead (eighth round) among their seven picks in the 1993 draft.

27. 1990 Seattle Seahawks (287 AV)

Hall of Fame defensive tackle Cortez Kennedy (first round) and three-time Pro Bowl running back Chris Warren (fourth round) headlined this class, which won't stand for long as the Seahawks' best. Seattle's three drafts from 2010-12 are the three best drafts by any team in the NFL since 2010. The 2012 class is still rolling, with production from quarterback Russell Wilson and linebacker Bobby Wagner.

28. 1984 Kansas City Chiefs (283 AV)

Tackle John Alt (first round) and defensive back Kevin Ross (seventh round) were among the best Chiefs ever at their positions, while nose tackle Bill Maas (1st round) was another excellent player in Kansas City for several seasons. Each of those three players made two Pro Bowls and combined for 31 seasons as starters at their positions.

29. 1967 Cleveland Browns (267 AV)

Not a lot of household names here -- final pick Ben Davis (17th round) was the only member of the class to make a Pro Bowl -- but the players Cleveland drafted in '67 combined to play more than 1,000 career games in the NFL. This class ranks among the franchise's best, because there were seven significant AV contributors.

Although they're before the common draft era, the Browns' 1957 and 1964 classes would rank among the best in franchise history. The '57 class included Hall of Famers Jim Brown and Gene Hickerson, and the '64 class had RB Leroy Kelly and WR Paul Warfield.

30. 2001 Carolina Panthers (224 AV)

The Panthers took LB Dan Morgan (first round), DT Kris Jenkins (second round), and WR Steve Smith (third round) with their first three picks in 2001. Along with 2002 No. 1 pick Julius Peppers, they helped lead Carolina to its first Super Bowl appearance in the 2003 season.

31. 2006 Houston Texans (190 AV)

The relatively young Texans franchise had its best draft in 2006. That year, they chose defensive end Mario Williams with the No. 1 overall pick, along with linebacker DeMeco Ryans (second round), tackle Eric Winston (third round) and tight end Owen Daniels (fourth round).

32. 1998 Jacksonville Jaguars (188 AV)

The Jaguars landed running back Fred Taylor and hard-hitting safety Donovan Darius in the first round of 1998. Taylor rushed for 11,271 career yards in Jacksonville and was the cornerstone of a memorable offensive attack. Time will tell if the Jags' 2014 class (QB Blake Bortles, WR Allen Robinson, WR Marqise Lee and LB Telvin Smith) can threaten 1998 for the franchise's top class.

Ravens GM Ozzie Newsome apparently has a draft blind spot: Wide receivers

By Jarrett Bell
USA Today
April 7, 2017

Maybe before his brilliant career is done, Ozzie Newsome will draft a wide receiver who blossoms into a Pro Bowl stud.

Hasn't happened yet.

"Would that be the last hurrah?" the Baltimore Ravens general manager pondered Wednesday during the team's pre-draft press conference. "Once I do that, I can go off into the sunset and life would be good? No. My job is to build the best 53-man roster and use all of the resources, and the draft is just part of it."

Still, it's striking that for all that Newsome has accomplished — after a playing career as a Hall of Fame tight end, he became the NFL's first African American GM and built two Super Bowl winners for the Ravens — he's never struck oil when drafting a receiver.

Newsome, whose draft resume includes Ray Lewis, Jonathan Ogden, Ed Reed and Terrell Suggs, has even drafted a fullback (Le'Ron McClain), a punter (Sam Koch) and a returner (Jermaine Lewis) who reached the Pro Bowl.

But no receiver. Frustrating?

"In that I was a wide receiver coming out, I guess you could say yes," Newsome, a first-rounder from Alabama in 1978, said with a chuckle. "But then I got moved. Maybe I don't know about wide receivers."

It's not that Newsome hasn't acquired some big-time receivers. Steve Smith just finished his Hall of Fame-credentialed career as a Raven. Anquan Boldin, whom the team could re-sign as a free agent, was a key contributor on Baltimore's last championship team.

The blip here might just be about luck and circumstance. But players like Patrick Johnson, Travis Taylor, Mark Clayton and Torrey Smith never fully panned out.

Then again, another opportunity looms to buck the trend. Baltimore holds the 16th pick overall in the upcoming draft, and Eric DeCosta, the team's assistant general manager, expects that Clemson's Mike Williams and Washington blazer John Ross might still be on the board. Western Michigan's Corey Davis could also be in the mix.

Newsome maintains that, despite using a first-round choice in 2015 on Breshad Perriman, he would not hesitate to select a wideout if the draft board dictates as much. It would clearly address a need that quarterback Joe Flacco would appreciate, with the injury-dogged Perriman and Mike Wallace as the only viable options in a thin corps.

“If we feel like it's the best player at 16 and he's a wide receiver,” Newsome said, “and we feel like he's going to help Joe and help the other guys, we'll turn that card in, in a hurry.”

With no guarantees, of course, that it's a ticket to the Pro Bowl.

NFL's top five offensive lines look to keep dominating in 2017

By Nick Shook

NFL.com

April 7, 2017

With the NFL draft just three weeks away, we're in a dead period when it comes to major changes in the trenches.

No worries, though, because those big uglies are busy squatting, benching, power cleaning, deadlifting and getting those feet right for the upcoming season. And while we await the hogmolly shake-up, we're taking a look back at the best offensive lines of 2016, with an eye on their outlooks for 2017 and beyond.

5. Atlanta Falcons

A major part of why the Falcons ended up in Super Bowl LI, and why Kyle Shanahan is now the head coach of the 49ers, is the offensive line.

I know, it sounds a little strange to me too. But Atlanta's offense was high-flying because its offensive line became a cohesive unit that blocked well in run and pass situations. A two-headed rushing attack of Devonta Freeman and Tevin Coleman thrived inside and outside the tackles because the line, anchored at the center by Alex Mack, managed to open lanes to run. Just look at the Falcons' first two plays of Super Bowl LI: Atlanta ran the same toss sweep (pulling franchise tackle Jake Matthews out into the open field as a lead blocker) twice in a row and found itself on the edge of New England territory as a result.

The running game -- in which Freeman averaged 5.8 yards per carry out of the singleback, and Coleman averaged 4.2 yards out of the I-formation -- was the base for the rest of the offense, which flourished out of various formations thanks to the threat of the potent ground game. Atlanta ran plenty of play action fakes, designed rollouts, bootlegs and even quick-hitting passes out of traditional run formations thanks to this. It forced defenses to be honest, and even when they stacked the box (eight-plus defenders), Atlanta still averaged 5.17 yards on rushing plays.

The result of such reliable trench play was the league's third-best passing offense (in terms of yards), and fifth-best in rushing (120.5 yards per game). Pick your poison.

4. Pittsburgh Steelers

That Le'Veon Bell guy? He's pretty good (and yes, we know he's patient).

That Steelers' line? Better than we thought.

A unit that once fluctuated with injuries (namely Maurkice Pouncey) and effectiveness solidified in 2016, and the results were evident. From Pouncey at center to right tackle Marcus Gilbert, Pittsburgh became reliable at four of the five positions. David DeCastro finally neared the potential Pittsburgh had in mind for him when the Steelers selected him in the first round of the 2012 draft. Even left tackle Alejandro

Villanueva, a previously perceived weakness who replaced the departed Kelvin Beachum, improved enough to make Pittsburgh's line one of the top five units in the league.

Bell's vision allows this group to do its job consistently, as does the inclusion of a sixth lineman in certain situations where more beef is needed up front. This carried over to the passing game, in which Ben Roethlisberger averaged more than 2.5 seconds in time to throw and was sacked just 17 times. Translation: Big Ben had time to work, and it showed in the stats -- 262.6 yards per game passing (tied for fifth with Indianapolis), 110 yards per game rushing (14th), 24.9 points per game (10th).

Bell finished in the top five in rushing yards (1,268, seven touchdowns), despite only playing in 12 regular season games. Even scarier for opponents: This unit doesn't appear to be going anywhere. With the exception of left guard Ramon Foster, every member of the starting group is 29 years old or younger.

3. Oakland Raiders

Donald Penn went down at the end of the season, and Menelik Watson was called in to replace him. The Raiders lost to the Texans in the playoffs, going out with so much as a whimper. One of those two is no longer a Raider.

For much of the regular season, the Raiders were the darling of the league, owning hearts near and far (including this writer's). Their resurgence behind a young quarterback in Derek Carr and All-World defender Khalil Mack made for riveting television.

Then Penn gave up his only sack of the season, which coincidentally also resulted in a broken leg for Carr, and it torpedoed Oakland's chances. Weeks later, Watson was getting destroyed by every defender in his path in Houston, and we all got a real-time lesson on how valuable a left tackle truly is.

But this Raiders' line is the sum of its parts, not just one cog. The free agency acquisitions of Kelechi Osemele, Rodney Hudson and Penn paid massive dividends, while Austin Howard's signing in 2014 hasn't hurt, either. Lined up with Gabe Jackson, this unit cleared the way for the since-departed Latavius Murray and promising backs Jalen Richard and DeAndre Washington. That backfield might get a heavyweight addition with a certain mode of beastly nature, creating a ground game that is poised to wallop opponents in 2017.

Carr also was sacked just 16 times in 2016, so that part of the offense should be pretty good too.

2. Tennessee Titans

Say it with me. Exotic...smashmouth.

Oh, you didn't hear that?

EXOTIC SMASHMOUTH!!!

Just watch Bucky Brooks' breakdown of DeMarco Murray in the Exotic Smashmouth that is Tennessee's offense. It's beautiful. But it doesn't work without a line that is young and one of the most, if not the most promising units in the NFL.

Tennessee's run-first offense is predicated on strength and versatility. The Titans can line you up and ram the ball up the middle of the defense. And they can also hurt you repeatedly outside the tackles.

It helps that Marcus Mariota is a mobile quarterback whose feet must be honored. It also doesn't hurt to have two tackles who are only improving by the week in Taylor Lewan and Jack Conklin.

When watching Tennessee, it truly is difficult to find anything major about which to gripe. Left guard Quinton Spain, center Ben Jones, and even right guard Josh Kline -- a Patriots retread who's found new life in Nashville -- were consistently effective in 2016. It showed in the numbers: 2,187 yards rushing (136.7 per game, good for third best in the league), 16 touchdowns, and a close-but-no-cigar finish to the 2016 season. With a starting five that goes 22, 27, 27, 25 and 25 in age from left to right, things are looking up in Nashville.

1. Dallas Cowboys

I'm actually going to spend the least amount of time here, because all you really need is Ezekiel Elliott's rookie tape to understand how good this line is.

As rookie quarterback Dak Prescott got acclimated to the pro game with simpler, quicker passes, Elliott shouldered the load, running through Mack-truck-wide holes to gain huge chunks of yardage. Prescott had time to throw, reliable targets and an even more trustworthy running game, which is all thanks to Dallas' line.

We covered how they were constructed. A collection of wise draft picks plus holdover Doug Free lifted Elliott to the league's lead in rushing yards at 1,631 to go with 15 touchdowns. But Dallas has a new hurdle to clear in the coming months with the fairly surprising retirement of Free, and departure of Ronald Leary in free agency. Instead of going six deep across the line, they now have a hole.

But while we await their move, Dallas in 2016 ranks among the league's best. And until they're proven otherwise, they'll remain atop the throne. But the gap isn't wide between them and the rest.

Kapri Bibbs, Bennie Fowler sign tenders with Broncos

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
April 7, 2017

The Broncos set themselves up to hold onto running back Kapri Bibbs and wide receiver Bennie Fowler by tendering them as exclusive rights free agents and both players will indeed be back in Denver.

The Denver Post reports that both players have signed their tenders. Center Matt Paradis, wide receiver Jordan Taylor and long snapper Casey Kreiter did the same earlier in the week, leaving center James Ferentz and linebackers Zaire Anderson and Shaq Barrett as the only remaining holdouts.

Bibbs carried the ball 29 times for 129 yards and caught two passes for 75 yards, including a 69-yard touchdown. A healthy return for running back C.J. Anderson would likely cut down on his chances to contribute on offense, although when Anderson will be healthy remains up in the air after Broncos coach Vance Joseph said last week that he may not be ready for offseason work after last year's knee surgery.

Fowler had 11 catches for 145 yards and two touchdowns last year and will join the likes of Taylor and Cody Latimer in competition for playing time behind Emmanuel Sanders and Demaryius Thomas.

DeMarcus Ware on retirement: “My body was talking to me”

By Darin Gantt
Pro Football Talk
April 7, 2017

After his offseason back surgery, DeMarcus Ware’s mind told him he was ready to come back for the 2017 season.

But after stopping to listen to his body for a minute, he changed his mind.

Ware told Nicki Jhabvala of the Denver Post that the thought of a 13th season seemed appealing to him at first, but the longer he pondered it, the less certain he became.

“You start thinking about your quality of life,” Ware said. “You still have the desire to get out there and play and compete and win championships. But my body was talking to me.”

Ware insists it wasn’t for a lack of people trying to talk him into coming back. He said he had offers from the Rams, Cowboys and Broncos, and said that had his Broncos contract not expired, he’d have likely given no thought to retiring.

“Football life is pretty short,” the 34-year-old Ware said. “But your life after football is a long time, and what type of quality do you have?”

“It wasn’t about the money anymore. It was about a way of life. How do I want to live? Because I knew God gave me 12 years to play this game, and now we’ve cleaned up everything those 12 years have cost my body. Going out here one more year and possibly tearing it up — is it worth it?”

And while it’s easy to wonder if his retirement is conditional, and that he might come back if the right time and place come together, he said he was certain he was finished.

“Once I make a decision, that’s it,” he said.

If that’s the case, it was a brilliant career, with 138.5 sacks in 12 seasons, putting him eighth on the all-time list.

Chris Simms thinks Jim Nantz was involved in ousting Phil Simms

By Michael David Smith
Pro Football Talk
April 7, 2017

The decision to oust Phil Simms as the No. 1 NFL analyst on CBS and replace him with Tony Romo was done with the approval of play-by-play man Jim Nantz, according to Simms' son.

Former NFL quarterback Chris Simms said on his podcast that Nantz played a part in the move.

"Listen, I think that certainly a company like CBS, they're going to run this by Jim Nantz," Chris Simms said. "If I'm going to sit here and be honest with you, yeah, that's what I would envision happens. Jim Nantz is their guy. 'Hello, friends.' He's kind of the face and voice of the network. He's a bigger linchpin than Phil Simms for that network, that's for sure. So I would think in some degree or fashion, I'm not trying to throw Jim under the bus, but yeah, I think he signed off on this."

Chris Simms also chuckled while his podcast partner, Adam Lefkoe, denigrated Nantz as an announcer, and Simms also said he thinks Nantz is more suited to calling golf and college basketball than to football. (Although Chris Simms added that he likes Nantz personally.) And Chris Simms said he didn't have much respect for the way CBS handled the transition from Phil to Romo, saying that Phil deserved for CBS executives to be upfront with him, and they weren't.

"I had to tell my dad first, before CBS or anybody, because I found out from an NFL insider," Chris Simms said. "I don't think he feels like they talked to him right away, at least warned him to let him know what was happening. I mean, that's just not what you do to a good, hard-working employee for 20 years."

Chris Simms has called some games for CBS in the past, but it's hard to imagine that he'll be back on CBS given those comments. And those comments may make it harder for Phil Simms to return to CBS in any capacity.

Draft position breakdown: Inside linebackers

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
April 7, 2017

1. REUBEN FOSTER, ALABAMA
HEIGHT: 6-0 - WEIGHT: 229
ARM LENGTH: 32 3/8 inches - HAND SIZE: 10 1/4 inches

A prototypical three-down linebacker, Foster took his time working his way up the Alabama depth chart, first serving as a backup middle linebacker before starting eight games as a junior and all 15 as a senior, working on the weak side.

Foster's size and speed makes him an ideal fit in coverage against tight ends and running backs. He's not the best inside linebacker in this class at reading plays as they develop, but his speed, quick first step and ability to deliver thunderclap hits more than compensate for that.

Foster's stock took appeared to take a hit at the Combine when he was sent home after an incident at a hospital during the medical-testing portion of the event. But according to an NFL Network report, Foster subsequently sent a letter to all 32 teams apologizing for the incident.

Nick Saban, Foster's head coach, defended him, saying at Alabama's Pro Day that the coaches "never had issues with him" during his years in Tuscaloosa.

"He's always been a great leader," Saban told reporters. "He's a signal-caller on defense. He's bright, and he's always been a great team guy and really well-liked by his teammates."

2. HAASON REDDICK, TEMPLE
HEIGHT: 6-2 - WEIGHT: 237
ARM LENGTH: 32 3/4 inches - HAND SIZE: 10 1/8 inches
40: 4.52 seconds - BENCH: 24 reps
SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.37 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.01 seconds

Perhaps no one in the draft is a bigger projection than Reddick, given that he spent his four years at Temple playing at defensive end. He now projects to linebacker, working outside in a 4-3 alignment and inside in a 3-4 package.

Reddick's first extended work at linebacker came during Senior Bowl week in January. He looked as if he'd been playing the position for years, relying on his instincts and physicality to make plays against the run. His coverage skills are technically raw, and he may not be ready for three-down work right away, but the speed, quickness and instincts are there.

No FCS product among this year's 3-4 inside linebackers had more tackles for losses the last two years than Reddick, who racked up 35 stops behind the line of scrimmage.

3. ZACH CUNNINGHAM, VANDERBILT
HEIGHT: 6-4 - WEIGHT: 234

ARM LENGTH: 34 3/8 inches - HAND SIZE: 9 1/4 inches
40: 4.67 seconds - BENCH: 15 reps
SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.29 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.03 seconds

Quickness and anticipation are Cunningham's defining characteristics. He is perhaps the best linebacker in this class at reading run plays as they develop, and he is rarely caught out of position.

His quick reaction leads to many stops in the backfield; he leads all draft-eligible 3-4 ILBs with 1.32 tackles for losses per game the last two seasons.

Cunningham pointed to his tackling as an area in which he needs improvement, saying at the Combine that he needed to finish his tackles better and "be more physical [with] the strength to shed blocks."

If he can refine his tackling technique and add between 5 and 10 pounds, he could avoid the missed tackles that occasionally plagued him at Vanderbilt and become a Pro Bowler within three seasons.

4. RAEKWON McMILLAN, OHIO STATE

HEIGHT: 6-2 - WEIGHT: 240
ARM LENGTH: 33 inches - HAND SIZE: 9 3/4 inches
40: 4.61 seconds - BENCH: 23 reps
SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.39 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.15 seconds

At 240 pounds, McMillan is strong enough to handle the kind of traffic he'll face at the core of a defense; he is capable at shedding guards that move up to the second level and is difficult to move, which allowed him to rack up 221 tackles for the Buckeyes over the last two seasons.

The biggest question on McMillan is how he operates in space, particularly in pass coverage. He broke up eight passes in his two seasons as a starter for the Buckeyes and generally did well at reading the quarterback's intent and reacting, but he will have to further refine those skills to handle tight ends and running backs on wheel routes. If he improves in that area, McMillan will rarely leave the field.

5. JARRAD DAVIS, FLORIDA

HEIGHT: 6-1 - WEIGHT: 238
ARM LENGTH: 33 1/2 inches - HAND SIZE: 9 3/4 inches
40: 4.58 seconds - BENCH: 23 reps
SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.29 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.30 seconds

When healthy, Davis is quick and anticipates the intent of the play well. At 238 pounds, he can handle an interior role in the 3-4 alignment, but he also has enough speed to be a 4-3 weakside linebacker and take on coverage responsibilities.

The biggest question on Davis revolves around his injury history, which includes a meniscus tear in 2014 and an ankle injury in 2016 that ended his senior campaign in October.

REST OF THE TOP 15

6. Ryan Anderson, Alabama
7. Duke Riley, LSU
8. Alex Anzalone, Florida

9. Anthony Walker Jr., Northwestern
10. Vince Biegel, Wisconsin
11. Jason Brown, UCLA
12. Marquel Lee, Wake Forest
13. Blair Brown, Ohio
14. Kendell Beckwith, LSU
15. Connor Harris, Lindenwood

BRONCOS ILB OUTLOOK

Head Coach Vance Joseph said at the Scouting Combine in March that the Broncos were comfortable with Brandon Marshall and Todd Davis as their ILB tandem. Marshall signed an extension last June and is under contract through 2010. Davis is a restricted free agent after receiving a tender from the Broncos in March.

"He fits the mold of what we want," Joseph said of Davis.

Davis, Zaire Anderson and Quentin Gause are the only returning ILBs from last year's 53-man roster under team control beyond this season. Backup Corey Nelson is in the final year of his contract, while Davis will become an unrestricted free agent in 2018 unless he signs a long-term deal before then. Anderson and Gause will be exclusive-rights free agents in 2018 if they play another season on the 53-man roster.

TEN-YEAR HISTORY: ILBs DRAFTED BY BRONCOS

The Broncos haven't picked a player who projects as a 3-4 inside linebacker since 2014. Since that draft, they found young ILBs via the waiver wire (Davis, November 2014), practice squad (Gause) and from the undrafted pool (Anderson, who was a 2015 post-draft signing).

2007: None

2008: Spencer Larsen, Arizona (also a FB) - Round 6, No. 183 overall

2009: None

2010: Jammie Kirlew, Indiana - Round 7, No. 232 overall

2011: Nate Irving, N.C. State - Round 3, No. 67 overall; Mike Mohamed, California - Round 6, No. 189 overall

2012: Danny Trevathan, Kentucky - Round 6, No. 188 overall

2013: None

2014: Lamin Barrow, LSU - Round 5, No. 156 overall; Corey Nelson, Oklahoma - Round 7, No. 242 overall

2015: None

2016: None

(Note: This includes linebackers drafted for 4-3 alignments that were considered strong- and weak-side outside linebackers, but not edge rushers. Therefore, 2011 first-round pick Von Miller -- who began his career as a strong-side linebacker in the base 4-3 alignment, but played defensive end in sub packages -- is not included in this list.)