

Broncos' longtime trainer Steve "Greek" Antonopoulos promoted to director of sports medicine

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The Broncos announced Wednesday that longtime trainer Steve "Greek" Antonopoulos has been promoted to the team's director of sports medicine, where he will oversee all aspects of the players' training regimen and rehabilitation. Assistant trainer Vince Garcia moves up to Antonopoulos' former role, assuming all day-to-day head athletic training duties.

"I'm very excited to begin the next chapter in my athletic training career in this new role," Antonopoulos said in a statement. "I've taken so much pride in serving as the Broncos' head athletic trainer for 37 seasons, and while it's difficult to pass on those responsibilities, I know this is the right move for my family and me."

Antonopoulos began his career with the Broncos as an assistant trainer in 1976 and quickly climbed the ranks to become the team's director of rehabilitation three years later. Since 1980, he's been the team's head athletic trainer. His 41 total years with the Broncos are said to be the most in league history with a single team and, in that span, he's been a part of some 900 games, 27 winning seasons, 22 playoff appearances, 15 divisional titles, 10 conference championship games, eight Super Bowls and all three of the Broncos' Super Bowl victories.

"Greek's been a cornerstone of the Denver Broncos for more than four decades, and we're excited to have him move up a level to become our director of sports medicine," Broncos general manager John Elway said. "In talking with Greek, he indicated that he was ready to make this transition and turn the head athletic training position over to the very qualified and well-respected Vince Garcia. There's nothing more important than the health of our players, and Vince is prepared for the important responsibilities as our lead athletic trainer. We're in good hands with Greek overseeing our sports medicine program and Vince becoming our head athletic trainer."

Garcia has been with the Broncos the past six seasons, spending five of them (2010-13 and 2016) as an assistant trainer. In addition to his work with the Broncos, he has also been the head athletic trainer for the South Metro Fire Rescue in Centennial (2014-15) and the head football trainer for his alma mater, the University for Northern Colorado, in 2009.

Demaryius Thomas' troublesome hip injury is more important to Broncos 2017 season than his voice

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

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His facial expressions, full of grimaces, and punching of a left hip that wouldn't cooperate told receiver Demaryius Thomas' story in September, even if he wouldn't. Practices were a grind and games were worse.

For a 6-foot-3, 229-pound receiver who relies on quickness and change of direction, Thomas' hip injury became a burden last season. He finally opened up on the difficulties he had as the Broncos began their offseason program this week.

"It was tough. Sometimes I couldn't stop. Sometimes I couldn't run certain routes that I wanted to run. Sometimes I couldn't get off press (coverage) because I had no power in it," Thomas said. "It wasn't my excuse. I was out there trying to help my teammates out and trying to make it not look bad on my part."

Thomas' injury was on his mind all season. The severity and diagnosis of the injury isn't clear. He playfully juked questions from reporters about the details with responses like "I forget." During the season he downplayed the injury but it was clear from his responses this week that it was on his mind. This offseason he decided against surgery, instead opting for rest and rehabilitation.

"It was bad at times. It got worse at some times," Thomas said. "I never thought about surgery. I didn't think I needed it. Right now, I feel great. I've been running routes and it hasn't been bothering me. It just depends on how you get hit. It's basically maintaining the hips."

Much of the talk around Thomas this offseason has centered around head coach Vance Joseph's call for him to be "a dominant player all the time" and a "leader of our football team." Joseph is searching for someone to be the face and voice of the offense.

Thomas said he's not concerned about the hip bothering him this season, but he also speaks as if one hit could lead to a recurrence. The Broncos' 2010 first-round pick said he had been dealing with the injury for a while but it got a lot worse after taking a hit in the Broncos season opening win over Carolina last year.

Under offensive coordinator Mike McCoy, the screen passes to Thomas will be back in the playbook and it's apparent there will be a more concerted effort to get him the ball. A return to McCoy's system may allow Thomas to flourish like he did in 2012 when he totaled 1,434 receiving yards, 10 touchdowns and was in the discussion for the NFL's top receiver when McCoy was the coordinator.

But first he has to stay healthy.

2017 NFL draft's secondary breakdown: rankings, sleepers and Broncos plan to keep the defense great

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

April 13, 2017

Editor's note: Fifth of a seven-part series breaking down the NFL draft April 27-29. Today: the secondary

The Broncos' swag sits firmly on the shoulders of their no-fly zone. A group of experienced, boastful and talented defensive backs have owned the rights to be called the NFL's top secondary in each of the last two seasons.

The challenge now is to replenish and develop the back end of the cornerback rotation with young, high-upside talent. Broncos general manager John Elway has made keeping the defense great a priority even when it's clear the offense is the weaker side of the ball.

Expect the Broncos to add a rookie to this group, particularly at cornerback, as they plan for the future. This draft is stocked with talent in the secondary.

Cornerbacks

1. Marshon Lattimore, Ohio State, 6-foot, 193 pounds; Grade: top 10

Strengths: Strong in man-to-man coverage, allows little separation and has plus ball skills. Elite athlete, fluid and good balance. Potential Pro Bowler. .

Negatives: Hamstring injuries have been a problem. Only one year as a starter.

2. Tre'Davious White, LSU, 5-11, 192 pounds; Grade: top 15

Strengths: Four-year starter and leader who can play outside, slot and special teams as punt returner (three touchdowns). Finger-waging confidence.

Negatives: Gets off balance at times with change of direction, hips a little tight? Not as comfortable in zone or off coverage.

3. Gareon Conley, Ohio State, 6-0, 195 pounds; Grade: top 15

Strengths: Elite footwork. Plus ball skills and mirrors receivers well. Experienced, can play slot or outside.

Negatives: Bad tackler, ankle grabber too often. Not physical. Can be beat inside.

4. Quincy Wilson, Florida, 6-1, 211 pounds; Grade: first round

Strengths: Ideal size for outside man corner and uses length, mirror skills to break up passes. Allowed NFL passer rating of 29.9 on throws at him in 2016, per Pro Football Focus.

Negatives: Not as smooth with footwork and off the line as other corners in this class. Deep speed is a bit of a concern. Not a good tackler.

5. Chidobe Awuzie, Colorado, 6-0, 202 pounds; Grade: first round

Strengths: Extremely versatile — used as slot, outside corner, safety, blitzing and all the special teams. Has straight line and closing speed. Good ball skills.

Negatives: Played a lot of off coverage, may be better as slot or zone corner. He can be beat deep and on double moves when he's guessing.

Next up: Sidney Jones, Washington; Teez Tabor, Florida

Mid-round starter: Cameron Sutton, Tennessee — Four-year starter with man corner ball skills and success as a punt returner.

Late-round sleeper: Will Likely, Maryland — He's small, 5-7, 180 pounds, but just put on the tape. His ball skills and athleticism should find him an NFL home.

Safeties

1. Malik Hooker, Ohio State, 6-1, 206 pounds; grade: top 10

Strengths: Elite range, can track a ball from just about anywhere. His instincts are apparent in run support and pass coverage. Had seven interceptions in 2016.

Negatives: Raw one-year starter beside two likely first-round pick cornerbacks. Has had hip and sports hernia surgeries.

2. Jamal Adams, LSU, 6-0, 214 pounds; grade: top 15

Strengths: Built like a true safety with ability to play free or strong. Will get in the box and bang. Plus instincts, awareness and ball skills.

Negatives: Will get out of control and whiff on tackles at times. He may be a full-time free safety because of limited deep speed and range.

3. Jabrill Peppers, Michigan, 5-11, 213 pounds; grade: first round

Strengths: Versatile playmakers are the new NFL wave. Peppers has played slot, outside corner, safety, linebacker, running back and returner effectively. He just balls.

Negatives: Doesn't have a well-defined position. Man coverage technique needs refinement. Too small to play linebacker full time.

4. Budda Baker, Washington, 5-10, 195 pounds; grade: late first round

Strengths: He doesn't flash on tape, he screams. Plays with attitude, intensity and energy.

Negatives: His size brings injury concerns and worries if he'll hold up in the box.

5. Josh Jones, North Carolina State, 6-1, 220 pounds; grade: early second round

Strengths: He tested off the charts at the combine and his 4.41 speed will translate well.

Negatives: He's too amped up at times and flies by the play.

Next up: Marcus Williams, Utah; Justin Evans, Texas A&M

Mid-round starter: Tedric Thompson, Colorado – Often overshadowed by two future NFL corners in Awuzie and Ahkello Witherspoon. One of the best ballhawks in this draft.

Late-round sleeper: Lorenzo Jerome, Saint Francis – This undersized safety impressed with his instincts at the Senior Bowl.

Broncos to hold local pro day for prospects who attended area high schools

By Nicki Jhabvala

Denver Post

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The Broncos will host a local pro day Thursday afternoon for about 15 prospects who attended area high schools, according to an NFL source, giving them all a chance to showcase their skills in front of Broncos coaches ahead of the April 27-29 draft.

Among the list of invites, according to another league source, is Wyoming receiver Tanner Gentry, a standout at Grandview who was named to The Denver Post's 2012 All-Colorado Team along with Christian McCaffrey. Gentry (6-foot-2, 210 pounds) led the Cowboys with 1,326 receiving yards and 14 touchdown catches last season as a senior.

Oregon tight end Evan Baylis, Colorado offensive lineman Shane Callahan and Auburn offensive lineman Alex Kozan also attending Broncos' local pro day.

Callahan, a Parker native and All-American at Chaparral, transferred to CU from Auburn in 2014. Baylis, a 6-foot-6, 250-pound former Grandview star, recorded 44 catches and 511 yards in his four seasons at Oregon.

Kozan earned first-team All-SEC honors by The Associated Press and was a second-team All-America selection by The Sporting News last season as a third-year starting guard. Before landing at Auburn, he was a lineman at Valor Christian.

Quarterback Austin Apodaca, a Silver Creek (Longmont) High grad who played at New Mexico the last two seasons after transferring from Washington State, will be there as well, according to NFL Draft Diamonds. At the Lobos' Pro Day, Apodaca reportedly ran a 4.74-second 40-yard dash and showed off his arm strength; his throws have been clocked at a whopping 61 mph.

And according to the Houston Chronicle, offensive lineman Palmer White, who went to Thornton's Horizon High and Division II Chadron State in Nebraska, will be there Thursday, as well.

Last year's local pro day featured nine players, the most notable being former Duke receiver Max McCaffrey (Valor Christian). The eldest of Ed McCaffrey's four sons signed with the Raiders after going undrafted last year and is now a receiver for the Packers. Former Wyoming linebacker Eddie Yarbrough (Grandview), also among last year's standouts, signed with the Broncos as a college free agent in May and recently signed with the Bills.

Broncos to host potential first-round target Christian McCaffrey Thursday

By Cameron Wolfe

Denver Post

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Broncos fans can continue to dream about Christian McCaffrey following his father Ed's path to play in Denver. The former Stanford running back will meet with the Broncos Thursday as one of their 30 pre-draft visits, according to an NFL source.

McCaffrey has been training at Loren Landow's gym in Centennial, just a short drive from the Broncos facility.

Denver executives have spent a lot of time talking about or with the 5-foot-11, 202-pound McCaffrey. General manager John Elway, head coach Vance Joseph and running back coach Eric Studesville were among a contingent of Broncos representatives who met with McCaffrey at the NFL combine last month.

McCaffrey is a likely first-round pick. His triple-threat skill set as a runner, receiver and returner make him one of the most sought after playmakers in the draft.

Christian McCaffrey grew up in the Denver area, attended Valor Christian and he's thought about playing in front of the Mile High fans.

"That'd be awesome. That'd be great," he said at the NFL combine in February. "I'd love to play there."

McCaffrey may not be available when the Broncos are scheduled to pick 20th overall, however.

The Broncos have C.J. Anderson and Devontae Booker at running back, but McCaffrey would be an entirely different type of weapon likely filling needs at slot receiver and returner as well.

NFL Network's Ian Rapoport was the first to report McCaffrey's planned pre-draft visit. The draft is April 27-29.

Broncos have new head trainer as Antonopoulos promoted

By Mike Klis

9News

April 13, 2017

History will be made the next time a Denver Broncos player suffers an in-game injury.

For the first time in 41 years, Steve “Greek” Antonopoulos will not be sprinting out to the field to attend to the player in need. After nearly 900 games serving as a Broncos’ athletic trainer, Antonopoulos has been promoted to the team’s director of sports medicine, where he will oversee all aspects of the club’s training and rehabilitation process.

He has passed on his head athletic training position to assistant Vince Garcia.

“While it’s difficult to pass on those responsibilities, I know this is the right move for my family and me,” Antonopoulos said. “I could not think of a better fit than Vince Garcia to become the Denver Broncos’ head athletic trainer. He cares about our players and always puts their well-being first.

Broncos head coach Vance Joseph informed the players of Antonopoulos’ promotion at the team’s 8 a.m. meeting Wednesday.

Not to overstate “Greek’s” impact but when he first joined the training staff as an assistant to Allen Hurst, the Broncos had never been to the playoffs and had just two winning seasons.

Since then, the team has been to the playoffs 22 times, including eight trips to the Super Bowl, and has added 25 more winning seasons.

The humble Antonopoulos would remind people he never played a snap, but he helped hundreds, if not thousands of players make it to game day in the best possible condition to perform at an NFL-caliber level.

“Greek’s been a cornerstone of the Denver Broncos for more than four decades and we’re excited to have him move up a level,” said Elway, who was treated by Antonopoulos for various bumps, bruises and injuries as the team’s quarterback from 1983-98 and now heads the team’s football operations department. “In talking with Greek, he indicated he was ready to make this transition and turn the head training position over to the qualified and respected Vince Garcia.

“There’s nothing more important than the health of our players and Vince is prepared for the important responsibilities.”

Antonopoulos was raised in Hugo, a cattle-ranching community on the eastern plains of Colorado that had a population of 759 in 1970 and 730 at last count. Upon graduating from the University of Northern Colorado, Antonopoulos joined the Broncos’ training staff as an assistant prior to the 1976 season.

He became the Broncos' head athletic trainer in 1980 making him what is believed to be the longest-tenured trainer with one team in the history of pro football.

It is a first-to-arrive, last-to-leave job.

"I've been living a dream for the last 41 years," Antonopulos said. "It's an honor to work for Mr. Bowlen and Joe Ellis and I couldn't have a better boss than John Elway."

While Antonopulos will continue to oversee the Broncos' training and medical treatment from on high, Garcia will now head the day-to-day responsibilities. Like Antonopulos, Garcia got his bachelor's degree from Northern Colorado. He served as the head football trainer at his alma mater in 2009 before becoming one of Greek's assistant trainers from 2010-13.

After becoming head athletic trainer for the South Metro Fire Rescue in Centennial from 2014-15, Garcia rejoined the Broncos' training staff as Antonopulos' top assistant last season.

It might be Von Miller's time to be Broncos' captain

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

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When Von Miller stands in front of his locker at the Denver Broncos' complex these days, he doesn't have to look far to see what's missing this season.

Or rather who's missing, because to say there is an opening in the leadership department would be a sizable understatement. Just look at the last two offseasons.

After the 2015 season, Peyton Manning retired, removing one of the strongest leaders to have ever graced an NFL roster. And after the 2016 season, DeMarcus Ware retired, and Ware isn't that far down the list of top leaders either.

So whether by necessity, timing or the way the football dominoes have fallen, it could be Miller's time.

"We're missing one of the greatest leaders in the National Football League, to ever come through the National Football League in DeMarcus Ware, so there's a little void there," Miller said Tuesday after the team's first offseason workout. "But I feel like we'll be able to fill it."

Miller is the Broncos' marquee player. He's the guy with the \$114.5 million contract that made him the highest-paid defensive player in the game.

Miller has been named to five Pro Bowls and three first-team All-Pro Teams, and he has won a Super Bowl MVP award. But he has never been elected as a team captain.

Circumstances may demand that he add that to his resume in 2017. In terms of resumes, with Manning's and Ware's out of the mix, Miller's stands out.

Miller is one of the Broncos' strongest voices, a free spirit whose wit and biting tongue find plenty of targets in the locker room every day. But he has not yet been in a role where he helped set the tone of the team.

Champ Bailey and Brian Dawkins were on the Broncos' roster when Miller was a rookie, Manning arrived in Miller's second season, and Ware arrived in his fourth season. And when Ware arrived, Miller simply was trying to resurrect his career as he battled his way back from a six-game suspension for violating the league's substance abuse policy and a torn ACL.

Time has marched on, and Miller, about to enter his seventh season, finds himself in a different situation.

"I feel like I've always been a leader," Miller said. "I've always had great examples of great leadership going all the way back to Tim Tebow and Brian Dawkins and Champ Bailey. I've always had great examples of great leadership, so I know what it takes and I feel like I've always done that."

Asked if it was important to him to be acknowledged as a team captain, Miller said, "It's important for me to win games and win the Super Bowl. You've got to go out there and earn the respect from the guys in the locker room. I feel like my whole career, I've always been kind of like the people's champ of the locker room. It's not really going to change. I'm always going to be the people's champ, but we have a void on our football team with DeMarcus Ware missing. That's definitely one of my goals, but the No. 1 goal is to win games. That's why I'm here."

However it all shakes out over the next few months, Miller acknowledged, as he did after Manning's departure, that replacing Ware's presence in the locker room can't be done simply by being named a captain. It will take a more concerted effort from Miller and others to set the tone.

"That's tough, that's just like when Peyton left," Miller said. "You can't really just fill that void. You've got to just modify the team and move on. Other leaders will step up, other players will step up ... but [you] can't really just fill a void like that."

Broncos' Von Miller: Shane Ray has 'been ready' to replace DeMarcus Ware

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

April 13, 2017

It's no secret those in and around the Denver Broncos will miss DeMarcus Ware.

They'll miss the linebacker's work ethic, his approach, his maturity as a player and his been-there-done-that-for-a-long-time presence. But by both necessity and habit, teams are forced to move on.

And as the Broncos move on after Ware's retirement, the player who will carry the most expectations will be Shane Ray. The Broncos traded up to get Ray in the 2015 draft to prepare, and Ray figures to be the starter in what was Ware's outside linebacker spot.

"And Shane's been ready," Broncos linebacker Von Miller said this week. "He's been ready for a long time."

He has to be ready because he is now a big part of the plan. Broncos executive vice president of football operations/general manager John Elway has repeatedly said the team must "stay great on defense" and that it's an offseason priority.

Ware, because of a fractured forearm and then back troubles, missed six games last season. He missed five games in 2015 with back issues. And while Ray did get plenty of the work when Ware was out of the lineup, Ware returned in the postseason in the Broncos' run to a Super Bowl 50 victory and played some of his best football of the past decade.

Ware's experience and willingness to study, then use a variety of counter moves to get himself free in the rush, always made him the best of resources for the team's other players, such as Miller and Ray. But there were some with the Broncos who believed Ray, who had struggled at times to make the physical adjustment to the NFL as a rookie in 2015, was ready for far more last season.

The numbers did bear that out, as he finished second on the team in sacks with eight, though he played just more than 58 percent of the team's snaps on defense. Ray returned a fumble for a touchdown in Week 2, had a three-sack game against the Cincinnati Bengals and in Week 3 and closed out the season with sacks in three of the final four games.

Ray has said, "I'm ready for whatever they need me to do. I understand better what it takes and being [Ware] and Von, you see it at the top level."

Ray said last season his biggest improvement came from doing more work in the offseason, especially in terms of conditioning. He arrived to the team's offseason program in the best of shape so he could concentrate on maintaining while he worked on the football side of things.

"Shane being a starter from Day 1 -- I think that will definitely help his game," Miller said. "He'll have to come out in key situations and be the guy this year."

Todd McShay still sees major need at tackle for Broncos

By Jeff Legwold

ESPN.com

April 13, 2017

Though Denver Broncos coach Vance Joseph has said he's not worried about the team's left tackle vacancy, at least on the surface, ESPN's Todd McShay still believes the Broncos should pursue a lineman early in this year's draft.

As the Broncos opened up their offseason program this week, Joseph pushed aside the notion that the job opening at left tackle is causing him any stress with the draft just two weeks away. Joseph said he believes there are several players already on the roster, such as Donald Stephenson, Menelik Watson, Ty Sambrailo and Michael Schofield, who could fill the role.

"We've got four or five candidates that are going to compete for the job," Joseph said. "I don't know who it would be right now, but we don't play until the fall, so that's a good thing."

McShay wasn't so sure as he put on his general manager cap and picked a full three rounds for every team in the league. He didn't make trades and made each selection with what he believed presented the best value for that team in that slot.

At the moment, the Broncos have 10 picks overall in this year's draft, with four of those in the draft's first three rounds.

With that in mind, McShay has the Broncos picking a tackle early, as in the No. 20 pick with Alabama's Cam Robinson. In the four previous mock drafts, McShay had the Broncos selecting a potential left tackle three other times – Utah's Garrett Bolles twice and Wisconsin's Ryan Ramczyk once.

In search of some more pop on offense, McShay picked Ohio State wide receiver Curtis Samuel for the Broncos in the second round. He ran a blistering 4.31 in his 40-yard dash at the scouting combine and could line up at running back as well.

McShay had the Broncos looking at two Southeastern Conference defensive players with their third-round picks, with LSU linebacker Kendell Beckwith at No. 82 and Auburn defensive end Carl Lawson at No. 101.

Broncos promote Steve 'Greek' Antonopulos, name Vince Garcia head athletic trainer

By Troy Renck

KMGH

April 13, 2017

For 41 years Broncos players found the same familiar face when needing treatment for an injury. Steve "Greek" Antonopulos served as the team's head athletic trainer, a constant presence at the facility day and night.

After four decades, Greek indicated he was ready for a change. The Broncos promoted him Wednesday to director of sports medicine, naming his assistant Vince Garcia to replace him.

"Greek's been a cornerstone of the Denver Broncos for more than four decades, and we're excited to have him move up a level," Broncos general manager John Elway said. "In talking with Greek, he indicated that he was ready to make this transition and turn the head athletic training position over to the very qualified and well-respected Vince Garcia. There's nothing more important than the health of our players, and Vince is prepared for the important responsibilities as our lead athletic trainer. We're in good hands with Greek overseeing our sports medicine program and Vince becoming our head athletic trainer."

Antonopulos began his career in Denver as an assistant trainer in 1976. His 41 years are believed to be longest in NFL history with one team.

"While it's difficult to pass on those responsibilities, I know this is the right move for my family and me," Antonopulos said. "I could not think of a better fit than Vince Garcia to become the Denver Broncos' head athletic trainer. He cares about our players, and always puts their well-being first."

Garcia served as Antonopulos' assistant the past five seasons. He earned his bachelor's degree in sport and exercises science from Northern Colorado, and earned his master's degree in sports medicine from Oregon State.

Broncos host Christian McCaffrey Thursday, visited with Cam Robinson Wednesday

By Troy Renck
KMGH
April 13, 2017

No need for an airline ticket. All Christian McCaffrey requires is a trip north on I-25 to visit the Broncos on Thursday. He remains one of the greatest homegrown athletes in state history, a former breathtaking star at Valor Christian. Nonetheless, hometown or not, this counts as one of the team's official 30 visits.

This one moves the needle.

For an offense that needs "juice," as coach Vance Joseph admitted, McCaffrey entices the audience. No running back in this draft boasts his versatility. He can run between the tackles, work as a third-down weapon, line up as a slot receiver and return punts and kicks. He fits the pro game given his multi-layered skill set. A projected late first-rounder two months ago, McCaffrey is now expected to go in the top 17 picks. The Broncos select at No. 20 overall.

Would the Broncos consider trading up for him? Given their other needs, it would be a mild surprise. However, the Broncos want a speedy back to complement C.J. Anderson. Last month, the team hosted Oklahoma's Joe Mixon, a player some teams have taken off their draft board because of his suspension for punching a female student at Oklahoma in 2014.

The most glaring need sits at left tackle. It is not likely the starter is on the roster, though Menelik Watson, Donald Stephenson and Ty Sambrailo are options. The Broncos visited with Alabama's Cam Robinson Wednesday. He made headlines in college as a road grader, but also ran into trouble. He was arrested in Louisiana 13 months ago on guns and marijuana possession charges. However, the case was dropped. Robinson has the size and strength of a starting NFL tackle -- 6-foot-6, 322 pounds -- but his pass blocking has raised concerns. The Broncos also have interest in left tackles Garrett Bolles, who plays violently, but raw, and Ryan Ramczyk, who won't be cleared to participate until June following hip surgery.

According to a report, the Broncos will also visit this week with Wisconsin outside linebacker T.J. Watt, the younger brother of Texans star J.J. Watt. Watt showed strong skills as pass rusher with relentless effort, but will need to become more diverse with his moves to succeed in the NFL.

Broncos' Demaryius Thomas welcomes return of McCoy to Denver

By Arnie Stapleton
Associated Press
April 13, 2017

Demaryius Thomas is smiling again. The pain in his left hip is gone. Mike McCoy is here again.

Thomas expects these two developments to help him have a resurgent 2017 season and fulfill new coach Vance Joseph's plea to be a more consistent leader.

Thomas hobbled through much of last season with a painful hip injury but still managed his fifth consecutive 90-catch, 1,000-yard season.

Probably nobody in Denver was happier than Thomas when McCoy returned as Denver's offensive coordinator after four seasons as head coach of the Chargers. Thomas spent his first three seasons in the NFL with McCoy calling the plays and he thrived whether it was Tim Tebow or Peyton Manning throwing to him.

Thomas eagerly awaits the return of his signature screen plays, the ones he routinely turned into huge gains and touchdowns.

"That was one of my first thoughts — the screen passes," Thomas said. "I remember talking to (wide receivers coach) Tyke (Tolbert) and he was mentioning the same thing. The years we played together with Mike were some of my best years. I look forward to it this year, as well."

Thomas figures McCoy's play calls — whether they're to Trevor Siemian or Paxton Lynch — will help him be the type of leader Joseph wants him to become.

At the annual NFL meetings last month, Joseph called out Thomas, saying, "I want him to be a dominant player all the time, I don't want him to ease into games. ... It's time. He's a great player. He can take over a game, but I want his mindset to be every game we play to walk on the field and take over a game."

Thomas welcomed the challenge.

"It means a lot," he said. "Definitely, the first thing I thought was more opportunities and chances to get the ball more, but also be that guy to get the offense sparking."

He thinks he'll be able to do that now that his hip isn't barking at him like it did most of last season .

"It was bad at times. It got worse sometimes. I never thought about surgery. I could get it, but I don't think I really need it right now," Thomas said. "I feel great. I've been running routes and it hasn't been bothering me. It just depends on how you get hit now. It's basically maintaining the hips."

Thomas fought through the injury and was able to catch 90 passes for 1,083 yards and five TDs, but he was clearly hampered almost the entire season.

"It was tough. Sometimes I couldn't stop and sometimes I couldn't run certain routes that I wanted to run. Sometimes I couldn't get off press because I had no power in it," Thomas said. "But it wasn't my excuse. I was out there, going out, trying to help my teammates out and trying not to make it look bad on my part."

Thomas has had problems with the hip for years as he takes massive hits from defensive backs who need extra oomph to take down a 6-foot-3, 230-pound receiver. But he declined to say specifically what was wrong with his hip.

"I forget," he cracked.

Yet, he insisted it won't be a problem again this season.

"No, it won't. I'm going to be on top of it," he said. "I'm going to do whatever I need to do to be 100 (percent)."

When the Broncos began their offseason program this week, Joseph said the QB job is an open competition between Siemian, the incumbent, and Lynch, the 2016 first-rounder.

That uncertainty doesn't seem to bother Thomas, an eighth-year pro and the longest-tenured member of the team.

"I'm kind of used to it now," Thomas said. "We've got a new team, new coach and new faces all around. I think it's going to be a competition from my position to the quarterback position to the offensive line position. That will only make it better to see who is going to be out fighting with you.

"We're all excited. Those guys are ready to work. I've been talking to both of them. I'm fine with playing with either one, whoever becomes the top guy."

St. Louis sues NFL, teams over Rams relocation to LA

By Jim Slater
Associated Press
April 13, 2017

The city of St. Louis filed a lawsuit Wednesday against the National Football League over the Rams' relocation to Los Angeles, alleging the league violated its own relocation guidelines and enriched itself at the expense of the community it left behind.

The move comes 15 months after the team departed. St. Louis is joined in the lawsuit by St. Louis County and the region's sports authority. The lawsuit filed in St. Louis Circuit Court names the NFL, all 32 teams and their owners, and seeks unspecified but "extensive" damages and restitution.

The NFL says there is "no legitimate basis" for the lawsuit. A spokesman for the league, Brian McCarthy, said it worked diligently with local and state officials in a process he calls "honest and fair."

The Rams moved from Los Angeles to St. Louis prior to the 1995 season, lured in part by a new taxpayer-built domed stadium. Stan Kroenke, a real estate billionaire and native of Missouri, was minority owner of the team until purchasing it outright in 2010, two years after the death of longtime majority owner Georgia Frontiere.

The suit claims that it wasn't long afterward that Kroenke began plotting a move, despite public comments from him and team executive Kevin Demoff that the Rams hoped to remain in St. Louis for the long term.

"In the years leading up to the Rams relocation request, Rams officials decided to move the team and confidentially determined that they would be interested in exploiting any opportunity to do so," the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit notes that since St. Louis officials weren't aware a move was essentially a done deal, they spent millions of dollars developing plans for a new riverfront stadium project aimed at retaining the Rams.

"The Rams never intended to engage in good faith negotiations with St. Louis," the lawsuit says.

In February 2014, Kroenke bought land in Inglewood, California. According to the lawsuit, Demoff said it was "not a piece of land that's any good for a football stadium" when asked about the purchase.

"The size and the shape aren't good for a football stadium," Demoff said then.

But the lawsuit notes that after league owners approved the move in January 2016, Demoff told an interviewer he recalled Kroenke calling him after inspecting the California property in 2013 and saying it was "an unbelievable site" for a football stadium. The lawsuit says Demoff said the call was one of the "moments in your life you never forget."

The Inglewood stadium is expected to open in 2019. The Rams are playing at Memorial Coliseum until then.

The NFL adopted relocation guidelines in 1984. The lawsuit claims the league violated those guidelines "and instead focused solely on whether more money could be made in Los Angeles — a factor which does not justify relocation under the Policy," the lawsuit states.

The lawsuit alleges that while the league has enriched itself and its teams with the move, St. Louis has lost an estimated \$1.85 million to \$3.5 million each year in amusement and ticket tax collections, as well as roughly \$7.5 million in property taxes. In total, the city will have lost more than \$100 million in net proceeds, the suit alleges.

The lawsuit is among several filed over the Rams' departure. Three separate lawsuits related to personal seat licenses were consolidated into one suit. Another suit filed by the regional sports authority seeks to keep the Rams from obtaining the team's former practice facility in St. Louis County for \$1 in 2024, as spelled out in the team's original lease.

The Rams finished 4-12 in their first season back in Los Angeles and haven't had a winning record in any season since 2003.

Sophomore Spurt or Slump?

By Albert Breer

MMQB

April 13, 2017

The rules are the rules, so first-year Rams coach Sean McVay has spent a lot more time since January looking at his new quarterback on a television monitor than he has looking him in the eye. With the team's offseason program starting this week, McVay readily concedes he and Jared Goff have a long way to go in making the team's massive investment in the QB look smart.

But go ahead and ask McVay what's made him most excited. He won't skip a beat.

"New Orleans. New Orleans. Watch the New Orleans game," he says, laughing. "He made a lot good throws, where he moved, he slid, he had a good feel for the pocket. When things condensed around him, he threw for a couple touchdowns. He ends up making a zero audible vs. a zero pressure, where he gets to max protection and hits Tavon Austin on a corner route in a 3-by-1 formation.

"If you buzz through that game, there's a handful of plays that get you encouraged, where he's moving, he's making athletic throws, and he's showing he can take a hit and get the ball out. He made a lot of throws in that game you get excited about. And he's doing things mentally, where you can see he's making protection audibles and getting the ball where it should be vs. those pressure looks."

Over the next two weeks, we will obsess over where Mitchell Trubisky and Deshaun Watson and the rest of the draft quarterbacks will land. Most people won't spend a second thinking about the guys we were obsessing over a year ago. But for those quarterbacks—Goff and fellow 2016 first-rounders Carson Wentz and Paxton Lynch—these weeks are critical, maybe moreso than they are for even Trubisky and Watson.

In this week's Game Plan, we're going heavy on the draft, with a look at the big-name quarterback who's falling, the few knocks on Myles Garrett, how football teams look at college basketball players, why the Giants and Steelers and Chargers should be looking closely at young quarterbacks, and much more.

But we'll start with the 2016 first-round quarterbacks, and what many coaches believe is the most critical offseason of any player's career—the one between rookie year and Year 2, when growth should be at its most rapid. It started for Lynch in Denver on Monday, and Wentz and the Eagles get going next Monday.

Likewise, Goff and McVay are now three days in. And McVay does have those impressions from the tape. As he explained, "The two characteristics that we really value a lot from that position—are you a natural thrower of the football, and are you tough enough not to flinch in the face of the rush? He has both those things."

Conversely, McVay won't hesitate to admit he doesn't know yet what ultimately he'll need to know most about Goff. And to get there, he links the process ahead to a belief that's deeply embedded in McVay's football heritage.

"This goes back to what my grandpa (ex-Niners architect John McVay) instilled in me, from Bill (Walsh)," McVay said. "The quarterback position is the most difficult position. So everything that we do is geared towards making the most difficult position as easy as possible. And everything that you do is with the quarterback in mind first.

"And the thing that was great about having two guys like Kirk (Cousins) and Colt (McCoy in Washington), who took such great ownership of what we were trying to get done, they could explain why they liked a play. And if they didn't like a certain play, whether it was Kirk or if Colt was playing, then we weren't gonna call it. I thought it showed the value of having that relationship and rapport."

And there you have the biggest goal set for Goff this spring.

To earn veto power that Cousins and McCoy attained over the next 11 weeks, as the coach sees it, two things have to be achieved. Goff needs to understand the offense well enough to articulate the "why." And Goff, McVay, coordinator Matt LaFleur and QBs coach Greg Olson need to build the trust to have that kind of open discourse.

Is it different to try and give a 22-year-old that kind of latitude? A little. But Cousins' results, and how a colorful offensive group in Washington responded to McVay's style is proof positive that it's been effective.

As for where they are now, the limited face time coach and quarterback have had has been largely uneventful. Goff was in two-hour meetings with the staff Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. They covered style of play, formations, motions and personnel groupings on Day 1, baseline drop-back concepts on Day 2, and protections Wednesday. It wasn't intimate—all the skill players were there.

But McVay was able to get a little more in January when he spoke with Goff during his interview process.

"The thing I really liked in how he came off, even before he had any idea we'd be working together, clearly things didn't go as well as we would've liked last year, but he made no excuses," McVay said. "He took full accountability and I sensed a guy who was challenged to respond in the right kind of ways, as opposed to making excuses for not playing as well as we would've liked last year."

Of course, Goff hasn't been sitting on his hands the past three months. One big focus in his work away from the facility has been on finding consistency in the kind of stroke he had in that New Orleans game. And he'll continue to work on his drops from center and becoming a better distributor and more aggressive downfield.

McVay and Goff will get to that when they hit the field in a few weeks. For now, the good news is McVay sees evidence that, while there's a long way to go, the vault of draft capital the Rams yielded for the guy on that Saints tape eventually will prove to be well worth it.

"You see the natural thrower, you see the toughness, those are the things you get excited about," McVay said. "And then, what you also appreciate is, if this guy stayed in college, he'd be a senior right now without even having redshirted. ... So he has a lot of maturing and developing to come. When you see those kinds of skills, it gets you excited about the opportunity to work with him and try to help him develop and reach that highest potential. And I know Greg and Matt feel the same way."

So that's Goff. His draft classmates? Glad you asked ...

- Paxton's progress: Broncos coach Vance Joseph said this week that he'd like the competition between Trevor Siemian and Lynch to go deep into the summer. That's the way it'll go if both are assimilating to the new staff and playing well. But I believe the presence of new/old offensive coordinator Mike McCoy gives Lynch a leg up, and for a couple reasons.

First, McCoy is master at retrofitting his scheme to match its signal-caller. In fact, it's the mark of who he is as a coach. He made it work for Tim Tebow one year, Peyton Manning the next. So he should be able to mitigate that Lynch is raw, and that means talent will matter more. Second, as he did for both Rivers and Peyton Manning, McCoy plans to add elements of Gary Kubiak's offense to ease the transition.

Joseph, for his part, has seen every inch of game and practice tape from Lynch's rookie year, and I'm told he reached out to Kubiak to get a more complete picture on his new quarterbacks. Two things on Lynch's game tape that impressed the staff: 1) How he seamlessly came into the Tampa game and competed; 2) How he took drops from center. Having been a shotgun QB in college, that showed he's coachable.

That's not to say he's perfect. Lynch was less effective in his two starts than when he came into that Tampa game and flashed on the fly, a sign that he had more trouble with defenses game-planning for him. But there's certainly plenty to work with here.

- What about Wentz? Goff played 393 snaps and threw 205 balls as a rookie. Lynch played 176 snaps and threw 83 passes. By comparison, Wentz played 1,127 snaps (second most among all NFL QBs in 2016) and threw 607 balls. The Eagles rookie started hot, had to deal with defensive coaches getting tape and building a book on him, leveled off, and then continued to grow.

Naturally, we know more about Wentz. For obvious reasons, there's more optimism on Wentz nationally than the other two. But that doesn't mean there's not plenty of work to be done. The Eagles sent him off in January with two directives, as I understand them. One, he needed to rest a worn out throwing elbow. Two, he was to drill his lower body mechanics, in an effort to play and throw with more balance.

The Eagles' staff will get its first look at Wentz on Monday, when vets return for Year 2 of the Doug Pederson era, and there's something else Pederson hopes he gets. "I want to see him embracing being a

leader on this football team,” Pederson told me, a few weeks back. “Now that he’s got a year under his belt, he can be the guy, a guy who can really motivate other players, challenge other players.”

Once we get to OTAs, the hope is that the offseason work on his mechanics and the rest will help Wentz’s downfield accuracy, one area where defenses made it hard on him last year. But there’s still plenty to be excited about here.

* * *

Each of these guys had help in the offseason, too. Wentz and Goff worked with renowned QB gurus Tom House and Adam Dedeaux; Lynch went back home to Florida to work with the coach who readied him for the draft, Charlie Taaffe. So each guy seems to be doing the right things.

But numbers tell us all of them won’t make it. In the five-year span between 2009 and ’13, 14 quarterbacks were drafted in the first round. Five got second contracts, and one of those was Mark Sanchez. Only Andrew Luck, Ryan Tannehill, Cam Newton and Matthew Stafford remain with their drafting teams. Bottom line: The odds aren’t in favor of all three of these guys becoming true franchise quarterbacks.

It will be fun to watch and see which of the three do.

* * *

FIRST AND 10

1. Nugget from the Matt Ryan-organized workouts this week at the University of Miami—more than 40 Falcons showed. And where last year’s version was mainly offensive skill players, this year linemen and defensive guys made the trip.

2. One question that’s faced LSU RB Leonard Fournette concerns his passion for football. And there’s a widespread feeling he’s driven by stardom. My guess is Jacksonville’s Tom Coughlin and Doug Marrone would address that quickly.

3. I’ve thought Stanford’s Christian McCaffrey looks a little like Reggie Bush coming out of USC. His college coach, David Shaw, gave me a different comp: Shady McCoy. And I’ll say if McCaffrey is McCoy, he’s worth a Top 20 pick.

4. Will McCaffrey go that high? My belief is he will, and that he’s got a clean record off the field is a contributing factor. Two backs he’s jockeying for position with, Oklahoma’s Joe Mixon and Florida State’s Dalvin Cook, have red flags.

5. At least four of the teams in the top six (San Francisco, Chicago, Tennessee, Jets) are very open to moving down. The issue is finding a team that wants to move up, which is why those teams need buzz to build on Fournette and the QBs.

6. The Lions unveil new uniforms today, and the Browns recently announced that they'll be making another major adjustment in 2020. Here's hoping both go back to more classic looks.

7. If Vance Joseph's criticism of Broncos WR Demaryius Thomas sounded familiar to you, it should. He was similarly tough on Mario Williams and Byron Maxwell in Miami last year. And there's no doubt, the Dolphins responded to his style.

8. To that end, Joseph had the word "Truth" painted in gigantic letters in the Dolphins' defensive meeting room last year. Accordingly, I'm told that word is featured prominently now in the Broncos team meeting room.

9. I think what's killing the running back market—Adrian Peterson and Jamaal Charles are sitting out there unsigned, and Marshawn Lynch is in a holding pattern—is that the draft class coming is historically strong and deep.

10. And the way to juxtapose that is to look at how well the free agent offensive linemen did, with a subpar draft class of linemen on the way. Six OLs got deals worth \$10 million per year in March, and three more came within \$1 million of that.

* * *

FOUR-DOWN TERRITORY

1. Is Myles Garrett a sure thing? Myles Garrett has been the presumptive front runner to go first overall in this year's draft, really, since he first stepped on the field at Texas A&M in September of 2014. That's how quickly his freakish ability became obvious, and we're now two weeks away from that projection becoming reality. But should it? And more to the point, should the Browns be concerned about pulling the trigger on what seems like such an easy call?

SEC Network analyst Booger McFarland's comments from the fall about Garrett's drive were reprised last week when Garrett opted not to go on with ESPN Radio's Mike & Mike, because McFarland would be in studio for the segment. So that gave me a good chance to ask around. "Those comments are pretty funny," said one AFC area scout assigned to the Aggies. "I will question some things about Myles, but I definitely wouldn't say he isn't tough. It's more personality. He's a different guy. How does someone with his personality mesh with a locker full of grown men? He's very different, eclectic, on another level with personal interests than the average player in an NFL locker room. He's just different. I'm not sure what clique or group he'd fit in with. So if I have questions, it's from a personality standpoint. But then I come back to what eases those concerns—guy's a really good person. ... But no questions about toughness, no questions about competitiveness. Keep in mind, the guy had a high ankle sprain for a lot of the season, and wasn't 100 percent. Do you think he could've turned it loose a little more? Sure, but he wasn't 100 percent. He was still on the field trying to compete."

Another area scout added, "He's more than a football player, he's a well-rounded person. For a kid to be as self-confident as he is, and know his strengths and weaknesses physically and personally at such a young age is impressive. That's a testament to how he was raised. It's a shame people are trying to

question or bring down a good kid that I'm sure any parent would love to have because he isn't your stereotypical football player. In terms of [how he] competes, put it this way—he played most of the year on a high ankle sprain. How many guys in this year's draft or the last few years' drafts, if they knew there was a legitimate shot at going first overall, would have gutted through that and played?"

So put the puzzle pieces together, and it seems the big hang-up is whether Garrett really loves football, which plenty of evaluators see as a vital question to ask of any prospect. "That's a different question," said the first area scout. "He probably likes football. I don't know that he loves football. ... It's not like he's naturally smart and he just loves football. He's naturally smart, and he could do just about anything he wants. He's a sharp dude. That's valid. If that's the point Booger McFarland's making, I could see that." And it's at least something worth mulling over as the Browns finalize their plans.

2. DeShone Kizer is the falling quarterback. It was only a few months ago that Notre Dame QB DeShone Kizer was viewed—at least publicly—as a potential Top 10 pick with the tools to be a franchise cornerstone. That last part hasn't changed. The rest has. Word around the league is that Kizer likely will fall through the first round, and be the fourth or even fifth quarterback taken. The reason? Where Mitchell Trubisky, Deshaun Watson, Pat Mahomes and Davis Webb check the boxes on the intangibles, questions arise on the 21-year-old Golden Domer.

"He's got the size, the arm talent and he's very bright," said one AFC head coach. "But there's a disconnect there. There are diva qualities there, and he seems to get voices in his head, like he's fighting who he is. And once the cycle starts, he can't get himself right."

It was just last week that Kizer's college coach, Brian Kelly, said that the quarterback probably should've stayed in school for his junior year, because he needed to mature on and off the field. While I'm told there was friction between Kelly and Kizer over the past year—Kizer never acted out, but Kelly took until mid-September to give him the job over Malik Zaire—there's also truth in what the Irish head coach was saying. Even scouts who like Kizer said it was clear that he had trouble reeling things in mentally when trouble struck, and that his mechanics and footwork crumbled way too often. In that sense, it was obvious that Kizer could've used more time in college. But there are plenty of evaluators who think it's a little much to hang the entirety of Notre Dame's disastrous 4-8 season on Kizer alone.

"From everything I gathered, it was an accumulation of everything," said one NFC scout. "There was not strong support around him. And playing for Kelly, things went bad fast. Every guy I talked to, seemed to like him, though. ... So many bad things happened all at once, they lost so many good players, it made him look bad. He's not an Alpha as a leader, but his teammates like him."

In the end, Kizer can do his growing up in the NFL—and most people seem to believe sitting for a couple years would help him, which is part of why teams are struggling placing him as a first-round pick. That said, the physical ability is off the charts. And if a team like Arizona can get him in the second round and stash him behind an established starter, the value may be, too.

3. Hoop dreams in Kansas City. The Chiefs are bringing in three prospects for a tire-kicking who, at least for now, are only tight ends in theory. VCU's Mo Alie-Cox, Kansas State's DJ Johnson and Texas

Wesleyan's Najeal Young all just wrapped up collegiate basketball careers. And if any one of them becomes a Chief, then they'll join fellow ex-college hoops players Demetrius Harris and Ross Travis on the roster.

In a way, GM John Dorsey is just following the lead of his mentor/former Packers GM Ron Wolf, who is credited by many in scouting as being the father of this practice, having routinely staffed the NBA's pre-draft camp back in the 1990s. The concept has grown since, and one premise has become the prevailing offshoot of it—power forwards with the soft hands to dominate on the boards, but too short for basketball would be just right for the NFL. And Dorsey has passed on the idea—his old lieutenant/new Colts GM Chris Ballard traded starting TE Dwayne Allen in March, in part to create more opportunity for Eric Swope, who played four years of basketball and zero football at Miami. It's been proven this is no wild goose chase. Antonio Gates is proof of that, as are Julius Thomas and Jimmy Graham. The Eagles went so far as to assign a scout to keep tabs on potential prospects in college basketball. And when that scout left, the Eagles saw the role as important enough to replace him.

“Look around the league, and you see the athletes who are winning these one-on-one matchups—a lot of them have basketball background—and we wanted to make sure we're researching guys to be part of the next wave,” Eagles vice president Howie Roseman explained. “Most of the guys, you see them, you don't know if they'll have a real chance to play in the NBA, based on their body type. But that body type is perfect for football.” Now, more often than not, the basketball players who give the NFL a shot won't make it. But enough do to where what we're seeing the Chiefs do this month is far from novelty anymore.

4. Malcolm Butler trade watch. Any fervor over Malcolm Butler potentially being dealt from New England to New Orleans has died down, but I wouldn't close the book on it yet. There was friction between Butler and the Patriots during the 2016 season, and so part of the consideration here for Bill Belichick has to be what version of Butler they'll get in 2017. Remember, Butler now knows what another team (the Saints) is willing to pay him, and thus exactly what he'd be missing out on in playing on the \$3.91 million tender. Maybe that'll motivate him. Or maybe things will become further strained. Or maybe Butler will simply make protecting himself physically a priority. The Patriots have to consider that uncertainty as part of the decision-making here.

The window for Butler to negotiate with other clubs closes April 21, and really there's no reason for him not to sign his tender then, since he can still skip the rest of the offseason program (sans the mandatory minicamp) without penalty. If he hasn't signed his tender by June 15, the Pats can cut his salary to \$660,000, so he'd be under contract (unless he's crazy) by then anyway. And if he signs the tender April 21, that would open a six-day window for the Patriots to negotiate a trade involving him before the April 27 draft. It's likely the Saints would reenter the picture. The Patriots don't have a first- or second-round pick, and New Orleans could dangle the 32nd overall pick that they acquired from New England in the Brandin Cooks deal. That pick could carry currency for a quarterback-hungry team looking to deal into the end of Round 1, and get in front of Cleveland or San Francisco while gaining the fifth-year option on the rookie's contract. So the Patriots could flip that to become a power player on Days 2 and 3, with a very deep draft class.

There's a lot to consider. And the idea of a deal makes too much sense for both the Patriots and Saints to not at least consider it. Now, they just need Butler to sign that tender next week.

* * *

OFFSEASON LESSON FOR THE WEEK

DeShone Kizer is widely seen as a fit for the Cardinals. Texas Tech's Patrick Mahomes is pegged as one for the Steelers, and many rival officials believe he'll land there. Likewise, Davis Webb has high-end potential and intangibles but is considered raw.

And those guys should be so lucky as to land in an Arizona or a Pittsburgh, where there'd be no pressure on their coaches to play them right away, and they'd have the chance to do the mechanical and classroom work they need without being thrown into a position to regress.

But this is a two-way street. Looking at QBs makes all the sense in the world for the teams too, and others like Kansas City or San Diego or the Giants. Maybe you'd look at the fact that Eli Manning, Philip Rivers and Ben Roethlisberger are now the NFL's longest-tenured QBs behind Tom Brady, or that Carson Palmer is 37, and think those clubs need an immediate return from their draft picks.

Here's what more important—not leaving yourself in the lurch at that position. And if you look back at that stat we gave you in the first section (just four of 15 first-round QBs from 2009-13 remain with their drafting teams), you'll have our offseason lesson for the week. Franchise quarterbacks aren't available every year, so you don't want to pigeon-hole yourself into a single offseason needing to find one.

That's how you wind up with Brock Osweiler making \$18 million, or Christian Ponder or EJ Manuel costing you a first-round pick. The key? Giving yourselves multiple years to find one. And once your quarterback gets into his mid-30s, it's worth giving every group of signal-callers a hard look.

"We scout that position the same way we scout any other position, regardless of the fact that we have a franchise quarterback right now," Chargers GM Tom Telesco said on my podcast. "Doesn't really matter if Philip was 25 or 35, that's just how we scout that position. ... So if the situation presents itself this year—and it could in 2018 or 2019, I don't know—fine, but this is the same way we've scouted the quarterbacks every year.

"Philip's not going to play forever, we know that. But I also know Philip's got a good number of years left in him, physically and mentally. It's work we'll do, and if there's a situation that presents itself, we have to be prepared to make that pick. And it could be anywhere in the draft. It may or may not be this year, I don't really know. And you usually don't know unless you have the no. 1 overall pick."

Let's just say, for argument's sake, that Rivers has three years left, and will retire after the 2019 season. If the Chargers open the window to find his successor now—meaning they go in at peace with the idea of, like Telesco said, taking a QB at any juncture of the draft—then they'll give themselves four draft classes to find one. And because of the rookie salary scale, they won't break the bank trying to find one.

So the question becomes whether these teams are truly in that window, and I believe the answer is undeniably yes. Tom Brady was 36 years, 9 months, 6 days old on the day Jimmy Garoppolo was drafted by New England. Brett Favre was 35 years, 6 months and 13 days old when the Packers took Aaron Rodgers. Here's how old those aforementioned quarterbacks will be when the draft starts on April 27 ...

- Palmer: 37 years, 4 months, 0 days
- Manning: 36 years, 3 months, 24 days
- Rivers: 35 years, 4 months, 19 days
- Roethlisberger: 35 years, 1 month, 25 days
- Smith: 32 years, 11 months, 20 days

Smith's the outlier, and you could argue he's less entrenched than at least three of the other four. Meanwhile, Palmer, Manning, Rivers and Roethlisberger are all right in that range where New England and Green Bay were when they used a high-end draft pick to get younger at the position.

Worst-case scenario? That you're wrong on the young guy and he doesn't develop. Second worst-case scenario? He does and the timing doesn't work out, and you have to trade him or contemplate letting him walk. That's where New England is right now.

And if they were being honest with you, I'm pretty sure they'd tell you that's exactly the kind of problem they really don't mind having. At any rate, it's a lot better than the alternative.

NFL overtime shortening to 10 minutes? Coaches back proposal

By Judy Batista

NFL.com

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When the NFL tabled the proposal to shorten overtime from 15 to 10 minutes at the Annual League Meeting, it did so with the expectation that a few more weeks of conversation probably would lead to the idea being reconsidered at May's Spring League Meeting.

The Competition Committee will ask teams for input over the next few weeks, committee chairman Rich McKay said this week. While Cowboys executive Stephen Jones, a member of the committee, has suggested that a more comprehensive look at how overtime could be tweaked might be necessary, one official familiar with the committee's thinking and the process does not anticipate that any other changes to overtime would be implemented for the 2017 season.

One wrinkle to watch: The expectation is that the reduction to 10 minutes almost certainly will be approved next month if Commissioner Roger Goodell pushes for it. Any rule change needs three-quarters support among majority owners. A straw poll taken in March showed only nine of the 32 were opposed, so it would take just one owner to change his mind. But while it seems likely Goodell would support a measure put forward on player-safety grounds, and members of the committee believe he does support it, it is unclear right now how much he will lobby for it.

Meanwhile, fan reaction on social media has been swift and largely negative, much of it based on the premise that a shortened overtime would lead to more ties.

According to NFL Network research, there have been 83 overtime games in the last five seasons, 22 of them lasting at least 10 minutes into overtime (the average time elapsed in OT in the last five years is 7 minutes, 43 seconds). In those five seasons, five games ended in a tie, an average of one per year. If overtime had ended after 10 minutes, there would have been 16 total ties, for an average of 3.2 per season. Since the creation of the modern overtime rules in 1974, there has never been more than two ties in a single season.

But it might not be such a straight line from fewer minutes to more ties.

Coaches don't think a shorter overtime definitely would lead to more ties. Houston Texans coach Bill O'Brien supports the proposal and said coaches coach to the clock. So if it passes, he expects more aggressive play calling -- maybe the occasional onside kick, for instance -- to be the result.

"It may change certain strategies -- you'll see more risk-taking to gain possessions," O'Brien said. "I don't want to see a bunch of ties, but I don't think that's going to happen."

O'Brien was part of one of the surprises that rose from the proposal -- the amount of support it got from head coaches, who are often the most resistant to significant rules changes, including the last big one to overtime. (When owners voted to give each team an overtime possession if the first possessing team did not score a touchdown on the initial drive of overtime, Goodell waited for coaches to leave the hotel for

their annual golf outing before calling for the vote.) Even McKay said after the new proposal was tabled that he was surprised coaches backed it.

Coaches, though, see up close the effect of long overtimes. NFL Network research showed that in 2016, games that ended in regulation averaged 127 offensive snaps. The average number of additional offensive plays in overtime games was 19, so there was a 15 percent average increase in plays. That is the average, though. It likely did not help the Seahawks, for instance, that they played to a 6-6 tie in Arizona on a Sunday night -- a game that included 31 additional offensive plays for both teams combined -- before they flew to New Orleans for an early start (and a loss) the next Sunday.

The Competition Committee is worried about the potential of even shorter turnarounds -- what if the Seahawks had to play on Thursday night after that long overtime -- and the toll it would take on players. Unspoken, but undoubtedly a consideration in this scenario, is that the quality of play on Thursday night almost certainly would decline, too.

Baltimore Ravens coach John Harbaugh is all for the shorter overtime, too, because he thinks a team coming off a long overtime game is at a real competitive disadvantage the following week.

"Ten minutes seems long enough," he said. "Usually by 10 minutes, you're just trying to survive the last five."

Said Kansas City Chiefs coach Andy Reid: "Anytime you can give guys a break. It's a tough sport."

The resistance to shorter overtime that Jones surmised was the concern that it would again cause more overtimes in which an unfair advantage is given to the team that wins the OT coin toss. That was what the rule change that allowed a second possession (if the first possession did not result in a touchdown) was intended to fix -- before that, Competition Committee members worried that a Super Bowl, played in the age of super-accurate kickers, would be decided by a long field goal after a team won the overtime coin toss and drove just a few plays. The New England Patriots scored a touchdown this year to win the first overtime Super Bowl, but Jones suggested that the fact that the Falcons never touched the ball is still weighing on some minds.

Still, don't expect the NFL to go to a college-style overtime format, in which one team gets the opportunity to score from inside the opponent's territory and then the other team gets the same opportunity. (And it continues that way, until one team has more points.) The NFL is reluctant to try anything that could be seen as gimmicky.

The 10-minute overtime is considered the best compromise -- enough time to determine a victor in most cases without adding too many additional plays at a time when player safety is a front-burner issue. For all the hand-wringing the proposal has generated, the Competition Committee -- and, members say, the players they discussed it with -- think it is the best way to address concerns about overtime.

As for the concern that there will be more ties? Members of the Competition Committee shrugged it off. If it happens, McKay and Giants owner John Mara said, ties make for a better playoff tiebreaker than something like point differential anyway.

Von Miller didn't know his Super Bowl 50 helmet was missing

By Mike Florio
Pro Football Talk
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The general public didn't know that Broncos linebacker Von Miller's helmet from Super Bowl 50 was missing. Neither did Miller.

"Honestly, I didn't even know my helmet was missing," Miller told reporters on Tuesday. "That's how crazy last year was. We had the best of the best and the finest investigators on the whole ordeal. They were able to find Tom [Brady's] jerseys and they were able to find my helmet as well. Hats off to those guys."

Miller added that the helmet is back in Denver, but that he hasn't had time to pick it up.

Via the item from TheMMQB.com about the recovery of Tom Brady's Super Bowl jerseys in Mexico, the Miller helmet was not in the home of Martín Mauricio Ortega. It arrived only after authorities asked Ortega if he had anything other than the Super Bowl XLIX and LI jerseys stolen from Brady. Ortega made a phone call, and then a friend showed up with Miller's helmet from Super Bowl 50.

And so Ortega managed to steal a key item from the MVP of three straight Super Bowls. PFT previously has determined that nothing was taken from Super Bowl XLVII MVP Joe Flacco. In a recent visit to PFT Live, Super Bowl XLIV MVP Drew Brees said that all of his gear is accounted for.

Christian McCaffrey set for Thursday visit with Broncos

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
April 13, 2017

When Christian McCaffrey was born in 1996, his father Ed was a Broncos wide receiver catching passes from John Elway.

Elway is now the Broncos' General Manager and he'll reportedly be renewing his relationship with the McCaffrey clan on Thursday. Ian Rapoport of NFL Media reports that the younger McCaffrey, who went to high school in Colorado, will be visiting the Broncos on Thursday.

McCaffrey ran for 3,922 yards and caught 99 passes out of the backfield over three years at Stanford that also saw him excel as a kickoff returner. That versatility has led many to project he will be a first-round pick with a fair number of those projections having him off the board before the Broncos are up with the 20th overall selection.

The Broncos have C.J. Anderson and Devontae Booker back at running back and Anderson is expected to be a full participant in offseason work after last year's season-ending knee injury.

T.J. Watt to work out for Dolphins, 49ers and Saints

By Josh Alper
Pro Football Talk
April 13, 2017

Wisconsin linebacker T.J. Watt said recently that teams have been looking at him as both an inside and outside linebacker as well as on the defensive line during workouts and he'll have a few more teams put him through his paces this week.

Watt told NFL.com that he has workouts scheduled with the Dolphins, 49ers and Saints this week. He's also worked out for the Cowboys, Lions and Patriots over the course of the pre-draft process and visited the Redskins. Watt said he's also set to visit the Broncos, making for a busy slate that the linebacker says he is happy to navigate.

"Through the whole first half of this whole thing, my schedule had been set and nothing had really changed. Then, to have coaches call in late and kind of pack the whole weekend and have multiple workouts back to back, some people would shy away from it," Watt said. "But at the same time, it's a once in a lifetime opportunity for me. If a coach is going to take the time to fly all the way up to Madison, Wisconsin, to see me work out, I'm going to do whatever I can to show him I can play ball for their club."

Given his production with the Badgers and the amount of interest that he's generated around the league, it would be a surprise if he doesn't join his brother J.J. as a first-round pick when the draft gets underway later this month.

Steve "Greek" Antonopulos a constant in ever-changing Broncos landscape

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
April 13, 2017

In four decades, almost everything about the Broncos has changed.

The home jerseys went from orange to blue and back again. Hundreds of players and coaches came and went. Training camp moved from Fort Collins to Greeley, and then south to Englewood. The stadium changed. So did team headquarters, from a haphazard collection of buildings straddling Logan Street in Adams County to a unified, ever-growing campus in the southern suburbs.

And most of all, the Broncos' trophy case went from barren to brimming.

One man was there for it all.

Steve Antonopulos, better known as "Greek," was the first man on the scene whenever a Bronco needed medical attention. When a player couldn't rise, "Greek" helped him up. When the rigors of a physical sport left a Bronco injured, "Greek" provided reassurance and a plan for recovery.

Whether the player was a Hall of Famer like John Elway or a long-shot training-camp prospect on the fifth team, Antonopulos was there, arriving in the darkness many mornings to give each player the care he needed.

"Greek's been a cornerstone of the Denver Broncos for more than four decades, and we're excited to have him move up a level to become our director of sports medicine," said Executive Vice President of Football Operations/General Manager John Elway. "In talking with Greek, he indicated that he was ready to make this transition and turn the head athletic training position over to the very qualified and well-respected Vince Garcia."

Over a decade ago, Antonopulos was 29 years into his career with his home-state team when he told fans in an online question-and-answer session that he "was living a dream" to work for the Broncos.

Fortunately for the team and "Greek," that dream continues. Antonopulos will remain a part of the organization as its director of sports medicine. He will continue to stand watch, ready if needed. But now the first person on the field to help a hurting player will be new head athletic trainer Vince Garcia.

"I could not think of a better fit than Vince Garcia to become the Denver Broncos' head athletic trainer," Antonopulos said. "He cares about our players and always puts their well-being first."

"I've been living a dream for the last 41 years while I've worked for the Denver Broncos. It's an honor to work for Mr. Bowlen and Joe Ellis, and I couldn't have a better boss than John Elway. I'm grateful for this new opportunity and am really looking forward to working with Vince, our players and coaches, and the rest of our very talented medical staff."

Antonopulos is the only person to be a part of all eight Broncos teams that went to the Super Bowl, from the miracle run of 1977 through the club's third world championship in the 2015 campaign. But his legacy and value to the Broncos would be immense, even without the rings he earned.

He is as Colorado as the Rocky Mountains. He is as much a part of Broncos history as Thunder, the Drive and the Orange Crush.

He is "Greek," and he is living Broncos history, an organizational pillar that continues to stand the test of time, even though his title and role have changed.

Five under-the-radar draft tight ends you should know

By Andrew Mason
DenverBroncos.com
April 13, 2017

What makes this year's collection of tight ends the best in decades is the depth. Starting-quality tight ends will be available deep into the second and third days of the draft.

Here are five tight ends who won't go in the first round but have the potential to stack up well against first-rounders like Alabama's O.J. Howard and David Njoku of Miami (Fla.).

JAKE BUTT, MICHIGAN

HEIGHT: 6-5 - WEIGHT: 246
ARM LENGTH: 32 inches - HAND SIZE: 10 inches

It is unusual to refer to a player like Butt as a "sleeper," but given the depth of this year's crop of tight ends, Butt could get lost in the shuffle after he suffered a torn ACL in the Orange Bowl last December.

Butt's recovery means that his rookie season will be marked with an asterisk. He is unlikely to be full speed by training camp. Given the nature of ACL recoveries, a true measure of Butt as a pro will not likely be available until 2018.

His work in Michigan's scheme should assure a smooth transition to the NFL; he can line up inside and outside and is a capable blocker on the edge. While other tight ends are better at specific skills, Butt could be right behind Howard as an all-around, every-down tight end.

GERALD EVERETT, SOUTH ALABAMA

HEIGHT: 6-3 - WEIGHT: 239
ARM LENGTH: 33 inches - HAND SIZE: 8 1/2 inches
40: 4.60 seconds - BENCH PRESS: 22 reps
SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.33 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 6.99 seconds

A productive player who sells his fakes well to create separation, Everett earned notice at the Senior Bowl, where he was the No. 3 tight end on a stacked South team roster along with Alabama's O.J. Howard and Mississippi's Evan Engram. Everett stacked up well in comparison with those SEC prospects, and secured likely Day 2 status.

Everett caught 91 passes for 1,292 yards and 12 touchdowns during his last two seasons at South Alabama, which was the final stop in a college career that saw him begin at Hutchinson Community College in Kansas before going to UAB, which he left when the school temporarily dropped football.

The only major concern about Everett is his small hands for the position; at 8 1/2 inches, they are the smallest of any tight end in this year's class, and could lead to some drops.

MICHAEL ROBERTS, TOLEDO

HEIGHT: 6-4 - WEIGHT: 270

ARM LENGTH: 33 inches - HAND SIZE: 11 1/2 inches

40: 4.86 seconds - BENCH PRESS: 21 reps

SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.51 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.05 seconds

No player at any position at this year's Scouting Combine had bigger hands than Roberts, whose 11 1/2-inch mitts are his most valuable weapons.

At 270 pounds, Roberts has the size and strength to become a better blocker, although he will need refinement in this area. His routes will need to be crisper, as well. But he should instantly be a viable red-zone threat, just as he was in college, when he was the most efficient red-zone target in Division I, amassing 16 touchdowns.

Despite relatively slow timed speed, Roberts can make plays in the open field, and is a load to bring down in space.

ERIC SAUBERT, DRAKE

HEIGHT: 6-5 - WEIGHT: 243

ARM LENGTH: 33 1/2 inches - HAND SIZE: 10 3/8 inches

40: 4.67 seconds - BENCH PRESS: 22 reps

THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.29 seconds

As with Ashland's Adam Shaheen, Saubert overwhelmed his competition. Drake is a non-scholarship FCS program, so he faced few players who are in the same galaxy as NFL prospects. As a result, his learning curve will be steep.

Although he was a latecomer to football, only taking up the sport late in high school, Saubert was productive from the moment he arrived at Drake, catching 47 passes for 549 yards as a freshman. The level of play in the Pioneer Football League meant that Saubert's progress seemed to stall, but he has the athleticism and intelligence to adapt and apply the lessons he will receive at the next level.

Saubert likely won't be ready for extensive work as a rookie, but by his second year, he could be a solid intermediate target.

JONNU SMITH, FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL

HEIGHT: 6-3 - WEIGHT: 248

ARM LENGTH: 32 7/8 inches - HAND SIZE: 9 1/4 inches

40: 4.62 seconds BENCH PRESS: 22 reps

SHORT SHUTTLE: 4.18 seconds - THREE-CONE DRILL: 7.12 seconds

One of FIU's team leaders, Smith explodes off the snap and plays with power and decisiveness. His measurables will probably knock him down to the middle rounds; he was the shortest tight end at the Scouting Combine, and his hands were the second-smallest.

But the aggressiveness and persistence in his game makes up for a smaller-than-average catch radius. Both of those attributes allow him to win one-on-one battles in tight coverage. Smith is a high-effort, highly coachable player who will likely extract every drop from his talent.